UNFORTUNATE
SOULS
unfortunate souls book one
JADE M. PHILLIPS

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To my husband and kids: I love you more than words can describe. Thanks for putting up with me during this process, I am truly grateful.

To my dad: I can't thank you enough. You have been my most loyal supporter and the first to read everything I put on paper. You are my hero and I love you.

To the rest of the fam and friends who have supported me through thick and thin- Thank you!

And to my fans, with whom I would have nothing to write if it weren't for you, Big Hugs!

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ABOUT JADE

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ONE: RUBY

Do you know what dying feels like?

I do.

And believe me, it is not something I would recommend.

The act of dying is like falling, except you have nothing to land upon. You fall further and further into the dark, each fiber of your body growing weaker and more feeble as time progresses. It is awful, lonely, and cold. Imagine standing in the middle of the Artic with no clothes on, in subzero temperatures, during a blizzard, and that would hardly begin to explain how cold dying is. Sounds fun, doesn't it?

So you lay there on your deathbed, cold as hell-frozen-over, while your body becomes stiff and paralyzed, the effort to lift just one finger —despite whether you're successful or not— takes more energy than it's worth. Fear thunders through you like inky storm clouds when you realize that you are, in fact, dying, and you want to yell and curse and holler out loud. You want to scream that seventeen is too young to die, that it's not your time yet.

Unfortunately, you cannot utter anything but a rattling breath, your mind fighting to take action but your arms and legs disagreeing. Your body shuts down sectors one at a time as though you were the captain of a sinking ship. Your blood flow ebbs, heart slows, lungs become heavy, muscles rigor, bones grow cold, and nerves go numb.

And the absolute worst thing about dying is that your mind's the last thing to go. You are trapped within your own personal prison, one that is crumbling around you, and every fiber of your being is screaming with the human instinct for survival. The inner struggle is true torture.

When you finally become tired enough to give in, accepting death's black chariot, it's all gone like falling asleep— except without the waking up in the morning part.

Gone. Black. Void.

The last thing I remember before the blackness of death, was a single wet tear, rolling down my cheek, releasing the last bit of my soul with its departure.

But there's another act of dying that I failed to mention— one many people cannot claim to have witnessed.

Re-birth.

Mine was quite unorthodox in its happening really, and though I wished it had been a traditional re-birth, it was not. It was nothing like waking from a deep slumber where you'd fade into the world one sense at a time, the sun leaking through your window shades to warm your blanket.

No, it was more like being ripped from a warm embrace and thrown into a tub of freaking ice water, the shock of it rocking you to the core. It is new and bizarre and jarring, and very, very painful to say the least. I now know why newborn babies cry when entering the world for the first time…

Any shred of light scalds your eyeballs. Any little sound jams its way into your ear canal, intensified a hundredfold, like the shrieking of sirens. Any touch is like sandpaper on your tender skin, and bolts of lightning connect every nerve, muscle, and bone, as your body tries to acclimate to its new and foreign surroundings.

Even your sense of smell heightens, aromas and scents so pungent they churn your sensitive stomach. Heat and cold are more intense, like the freezing burn of fire and ice, your mind flashing wildly with colors, sounds, and smells you never knew existed.

At least that was the way it was for me —my body bursting into a whole different world where I would begin my new life.

My life as a vampire.

TWO: RUBY

My heart hammered inside my chest as I flew down the stairs two at a time, betrayal twisting my insides.

"Ruby. Ruby wait." Mom called out after me but I ignored her and kept running until I hit the front door.

"You come back here right now, Ruby Carter," boomed my father's voice, or— as I'd just found out— the man who'd been posing as my father for the last seventeen years. A spiteful lump formed in my throat as I threw open the door, thinking if I ran fast enough I could avoid this whole situation and pretend it never happened.

"Honey, let's talk about this," Mom pleaded, and resentment flushed through my body like scorching fire at her calm voice.

I stopped momentarily to look behind me, wondering how my parents could do this to me, my eyes burning with unshed tears. I could feel my heart literally shattering inside of my chest.

My mom and 'dad,' the man who'd lied and said he was my biological father all these years, stood at the top of the stairs. His brows were creased together, his face turning red. My mom looked sad and I almost felt bad for her. *Almost*. She'd been in on this hoax too, never revealing the truth until now. I clenched my teeth and fisted my hands at my sides. As far as I was concerned they could both go to hell.

"You lied to me!" The furious lump in my throat grew to the size of a baseball, my neck throbbing from suppressed tears. I could barely breathe. "All this time you… you lied to me!"

Mom slid me a sympathetic glance, her voice coming out barely above a whisper. "Ruby—"

"No!"

I spun around and leapt into the hot, sticky evening and slammed the door behind me, hating everything about my life. A jack-rabbit bolted across my path as I ran down the drive, past the car I'd gotten for my sixteenth birthday. But I barely noticed. I was too concerned with getting away from the people that called me their daughter and I didn't look back. I didn't even dare a glance back at the suburban Arizona home I'd grown up in, for I knew they wouldn't come after me anyway.

Why would they? Both of them were never around anyway, more concerned about their careers than me. Had they been there when I'd broken my leg? No. Had they been there when I lost my first tooth? No. Had they been there when my dog had been run over by a car? No. My chest tightened like an invisible hand was squeezing the air from my lungs. And now come to find out that my dad wasn't really my dad after all, but a false replica, had me reeling.

Earlier that evening my parents had sat me down for a "talk," telling me that my real father had abandoned my mother when she was pregnant with me nearly eighteen years ago. He'd left and never came back and I couldn't help but think all this time my life had been a lie. Angry tears threatened to spill from my eyes as I found myself alone in the neighborhood park.

The sky was darkening to the east and grey clouds formed like giant angry sheep, threatening another summer storm— a storm like the one I felt raging inside of me. I resisted the urge to pick up the nearest rock and throw it, my hands trembling so much I'd probably drop it before I had the chance. A gust of wind whipped my hair behind me as I threw myself into the nearest swing, burying my face into my hands, trying to cry. I tried to let the tears fall, but couldn't for being so numb. I'd been blind-sided by this shocking information—and the night before my eighteenth birthday no less.

I couldn't help but wonder why my parents had waited so long to tell me that my father wasn't, in fact, my father. But as I pondered the notion, it all came together like the pieces to some jacked-up puzzle— how he never spent much time with me and how he always had trouble showing me affection. It's because I wasn't truly his. I wasn't his real daughter and he'd known it all along.

To say that I was infuriated was a huge understatement, a combination of abandonment and rage tearing through my chest like a jagged knife. I sat up straight, wondering what to do as the harsh breeze bit at my skin. Another gust of wind kicked up a cloud of dust and I squeezed my eyes shut.

At least I still had my boyfriend, John. I couldn't think of anyone else at the moment that would understand like he would. I slipped my trembling hand in my pocket to retrieve my cell phone.

"Hey." He picked up after only one ring, relief flooding through me at hearing his voice.

"John." I breathed, trying to keep my voice calm, not wanting to let on how upset I really was. "I… I didn't know who else to call. I—"

"I'm glad you called Ruby. We need to talk." His voice sounded distant, weird.

Wait—what? I scrunched my confused brows together, holding the phone between my chin and shoulder. I'd called to tell him about my parents, but the strange sound of his voice indicated he had something just as important to tell me. My insides squirmed uneasily and I rocked myself back and forth in the swing, my feet planted on the ground.

Silence fell between us for a long moment, while I tried to process what was going on. A piece of trash flew across the park and John cleared his throat.

"There's been something on my mind lately. Something I've been wanting to talk to you about."

My heart picked up pace. His words were ominous and gloomy just like the weather had become.

They sounded like break-up words.

But that couldn't be. John had been my best friend for as long as I could remember, and as we grew older things began to change and our classic childhood friendship became more than friendly. It was never like fireworks or anything, but it was as if we were always meant to be together.

Yet, instead of explaining, John fell silent as though searching for the words. A lock of my hair whipped in front of my face. I pulled it away.

"John." A treacherous tear escaped from my eye. "Say something." I felt the temperature drop as dark clouds covered the setting sun. I wrapped my arms around my chest and took a deep breath. "What's going on? Just tell me."

John didn't reply but his breath heaved in the speaker, making it sound like I was having a conversation with the wind. I was getting uncomfortable with his strained silence and forced out a laugh, trying to lighten things up. "What? Did you lose your scholarship to the U of A or something?"

"Just… just let's meet somewhere." He sounded distant. Cold.

Fear seeped through my body and constricted my lungs. I struggled to breathe. "John, you're acting weird. What's going on? Just tell me. I've had a rough day and just found out—"

"Rubes…" He released a huff, again thwarting my attempt to tell him what had happened. He then coughed, clearing a frog from his throat. "I got accepted to ASU. I'm leaving tomorrow to check out the dorms."

My heart plummeted like a skydiver without a parachute. John wasn't supposed to go to ASU, that was two hours away, in *Phoenix*. We had both agreed on going to the U of A in *Tucson*. And he was leaving tomorrow, on my birthday?

"But…"

"It's better for me. It's a better scholarship. Some of the best pro football players are recruited from ASU. I just… I can't pass it up."

My heart raced with panic but I took a deep breath and reeled myself back in, considering that I might be making a bigger deal out of this than it actually was. Of course I was happy for John and I only wanted the best for him. We could still visit each other on weekends, or maybe after a semester I could get transferred to ASU.

I feigned a half-hearted smile, trying to make light of the situation. "That's okay. We'll only be two hours away from each other. I'm going up to Tucson to set up my dorm next week. I'll make sure I bring your favorite bean

bag—oh, and on Friday nights you could drive down, or I could—"

"Ruby." He cut in. "That's what I'm trying to say. I don't think that will work."

My stomach lurched and I did what I always did when feeling uncomfortable—came down with a case of verbal diarrhea. "Of course it will. And maybe after a while, I can check out the nursing program at ASU. Maybe I could transfer there and—"

John cleared his throat, interrupting my rant.

"I… I don't think so. I wouldn't want you to have to do that. You need to focus on school. And I need to focus on football. We wouldn't have time for…"

"Time for what?" Betrayal sliced through my heart like hot syringes. "Time for each other? Time for a relationship? Is that what you're saying?"

His silence answered my question.

My heart shattered and tears stung my eyes. So he was breaking up with me after all. The man —the *boy*— I had known my whole life, the one I had thought I would someday grow old with, was leaving me just like my real father had left me and my mother before I was born, throwing me to the side like an old greasy lunch sack filled with stale French fries. And the day before my eighteenth birthday no less. *Bastard*. Sickness wrenched my insides and I thought I might throw up. I resisted telling him about my parents and what I'd learned about my father. It was pointless now that he was ending our relationship.

John sighed.

"I'm sorry Ruby. I didn't want it to end like this."

I swiped away my tears, trying to steady my breath. I didn't want him to know I was crying. Regardless, my tears found their way to my lips, spreading a salty taste through my mouth. The wind blasted through the park, crackling the speaker in my ear. John's voice was low and heavy.

"You've been great and all. But I haven't fully lived my life yet. I haven't weighed all my options."

My fingers curled around the swing chain, white-hot anger replacing my sorrow. I didn't know what to say or do. But one thing was for sure, I wasn't about to beg for him to take me back. He could go straight to hell right along with my parents. John released a sympathetic breath.

"Are you okay?"

I clamped my lips together, offering no response, thinking of the old saying, 'If you have nothing nice to say…'

"Listen. I'm sorry, Ruby."

Angry fire consumed me and, in retrospect, I wished I'd just told John to take a long walk off a short pier rather than offering my silence. *Awesome. This is just freaking awesome.* I released a mocking, huffing, pissed-off breath, fury crashing through me like a bomb. I finally found my voice, spitting out the first thing that came to mind, though it wasn't the best zinger out there.

"Have fun at ASU."

I threw my phone into the dirt. I wasn't okay. I wasn't fine. As a matter of fact, I was the complete opposite. I was devastated and alone— not to mention as mad as a toppled ant hill. In the matter of one hour, my world had crumbled down around me and I'd lost everything; my father, my family, and now… my boyfriend.

I jumped from the swing and raced all the way back to my house, the fierce wind pushing against me sideways, making it hard to run. I hopped into my car, fished my keys from my pocket and turned the ignition. I didn't know where I was going or what I was going to do, but I didn't care. I needed to just go, to drive someplace away from the aching in my gut and the blackness in my heart. And just as I peeled from the drive, the monsoon storm struck, howling winds bending the trees horizontally across the street. But I didn't give a crap about the weather, speeding like a maniac down the road, fat raindrops falling from the sky mirroring the tears flooding my eyes.

At the time, I was unaware that my impulsive actions would lead me to stare straight into the face of death. And instead of allowing myself time to cool off and process my screwed-up situation, I made a grave mistake by driving straight into the storm. Straight into danger. Straight into a path that would change my life forever. Straight to my death.

THREE: GUY

It's often said that a picture is worth a thousand words, and what a picture she had been lying there in the dirt, her body a work of art in itself, sadly writhing in pain. The glow of her pale skin, the contrast of the cherry-red blood running down her neck from the bite wound, and her mouth stretched open in a silent scream all had me staring in awe.

She was like a car accident, a beautiful disaster, and I knew I shouldn't stop to watch but I couldn't tear my eyes away either. The irony of her tragic allure wasn't lost on me.

In all the years of vampire hunting, I'd never seen someone turn before and I couldn't help my morbid curiosity. I was fascinated by the way her honey-colored hair changed from golden to near-white. The way her brown eyes opened wide with fear and began to take on a purple glow. The way her nails grew sharp and clawed at the ground. And then reality sank in and, as if I hadn't realized it before, the darkness of this off-putting situation crashed into my brain.

"Jesus." My jaw clenched in horror. "They got to you."

Despite her stunning beauty, she was in a tremendous amount of pain. I knew this, not only from the way she flailed upon the ground, but from my years of training. I knew a vampire's physiology almost better than I knew my own. And though I had studied how painful turning was and the metamorphosis that took place, seeing it happen was a whole other thing entirely. In all honesty, I was mortified, her torment causing my stomach to clench uncomfortably.

I wondered if she had a family and if they were searching for her that very moment. She looked young, and I imagined she might've been some unsuspecting college student on her way home from class when her maker found her. But that was just suspicion. Who really knew. But what I did know is she was infected with vampirism and it was only a matter of time before she was one of them.

"John." She moaned in pain, her voice like a siren calling to me. I frowned, wondering who this John was. I knelt down beside her, noticing she had more wounds than just the bite mark. It appeared she'd been in some sort of accident, yet before I could study her wounds, they quickly healed from the vampire blood coursing through her veins. I leaned in closer.

"Who's John? Is he your maker?"

"Maker?" She held her midsection as though she'd just had a bad batch of potato salad, but I knew it wasn't food poisoning that ailed her. "John, my boyfriend."

Oh, okay. So she had a boyfriend, or *used* to have a boyfriend rather, seeing her current situation. No big deal. But that brought me to another question. Where was her maker?

When a vampire decided to create another it was not a benign decision. They took it seriously and stayed with their creation as a mother would her child. They taught them and protected them until the Newborn could learn to live on its own. So why would her maker leave her to turn all alone?

I shook myself from my invalid thoughts. I wasn't there to wonder about some Newborn vampire and why she was the way she was. I was there on orders. I was there to kill…

Then why hadn't I yet? I clenched my jaw determinedly.

"Not anymore he's not," I replied to the fact that John was her boyfriend, reaching for my gun and stake. If a silver bullet to the head didn't do the trick –which in most cases it did— a wooden stake to the heart would. But yet again, I found myself hesitating, wondering what was stopping me.

Was it because this vampire was not yet a vampire? She remained human, not yet fully turned and I had to admit I'd never killed a human before. Or was it because she reminded me of the girl I lost long ago? Lily…

I shuddered at the rush of emotions the female on the ground brought to me, the situation hitting too close to the one that had started me on my journey with the FUSE army in the first place.

I glanced up and took in the scene surrounding me. The warehouse we had been staking out, the place where a coven of Unfortunates hid, was now blown to bits. And the parts that still stood were engulfed with flames. My men retreated into the desert to catch up with a few vampires and witches who'd managed to escape. I had been left alone, but it would only be temporarily.

I looked back down at my target, the girl who was turning into a vampire right before my eyes. A single tear trickled down her cheek and she looked up at me.

When our eyes met, a sudden surge of emotion crashed through me but as soon as it arrived, I pushed the feeling away, my finger trembling on the trigger. I had never been an emotional person, at least not since Lily was taken from me, and I could not let those emotions overwhelm me at a time such as this. I had taken a vow with my FUSE brothers and I needed to uphold it. Though only twenty years old and younger than anyone else in my position, I was still their Captain.

But as I glanced back down at the girl, I noticed that her frightened expression did something to me, reminding me of something, transporting me back to that night… Back to Lily…

No.

I dropped my arm, shoving my gun back into its holster. Damn it. I couldn't do it. I could not kill an innocent human.

Yes, I saw the paradox of my decision, and yes, that human would be a full-fledged vampire by sunset the next day. But for now, she was just a girl. A poor girl who had been infected. A beautiful girl I could not keep my eyes off of.

I inhaled and slid the wooden stake into my belt, realizing my next decision might change my life forever.

"Shit. I'm gonna regret this."

FOUR: RUBY

I gasped —and yes, in case you were wondering, vampires do breathe— the sudden oxygen rushing into my lungs like hellfire. My eyes flew open and I was thrust into an explosion of lights, sounds, and blazing heat. Pain shot through me like a thousand arrows, my naked body thrashing this way and that.

I wondered where I was, but most of all, why the heck I was naked. Is this what the afterlife was like? Seriously?

Confusion whirled though my brain like an angry tornado, images and colors flashing in my eyes. My nerves sent sharp messages through my body; messages indicating my bones were broken and muscles torn. But through the pain, an almost unbearable swarm of sensation bombarded me all at once.

I could feel the cool grass beneath my back and see the glittering stars above, closer than they'd ever been. And I could smell the scent of… the scent of everything. I inhaled the freshness of the grass, layered with the musky smell of dirt beneath. I even detected the earthy clay far below the layers of dirt and desert rock.

And blood. I smelled the blood of man and the blood of— I wasn't sure. But it was cold, cold blood. I fought the urge to gag, trying to crawl away from the chaos I'd awoken to, a war of sorts.

A large fiery ball exploded to my left, blasting past me like the breath of an angry dragon, singeing my skin and hair. I released the most unladylike sound —one of sheer terror— and tucked my head against the blow, the smell of burning flesh and soot filling my nose. God, I hoped that wasn't *my* flesh. But before my mind could come to any sort of conclusion, the concussion of another detonation boomed through me, adding to my intense pain. I covered my ears and closed my sensitive eyes against the blinding scene, wishing I'd wake up from this nightmare.

"Freakin' Fangers!" A man screamed out and, like a pack of horses, boots stampeded across the desert. I balled myself up tight against the ground.

I'm now well aware the meaning those words held, but at the time I was clueless— not to mention being slightly preoccupied by what felt like elephants doing the tango over my pain-ridden body.

But the elephant disco was temporarily forgotten when a fiery piece of debris crashed inches from my face, causing me to cry out, and feeling like I

was melting from the heat. I edged away from the flaming ball, my mind spiraling out of control.

"Move. Move. Move!" More voices hollered and others released blood curdling screams. There was fire, lots of fire and fear blazed a hole through my chest.

Another large chunk of metal came skidding by my body, missing me by mere inches. I covered my head from the splinters of metal and wood peppering my body. I coughed and sputtered, curling up tight.

Wherever I was, I needed to get away or I would die…

I creased my brows. Strangely, the thought befuddled me. *I would die?* Something wasn't adding up. I tried to grasp what I was missing, but couldn't.

I looked up to see the night sky now covered in blackish-orange smoke, billowing from the wreckage below. I then sensed a presence coming toward me and I tried to move, to run, but I just stumbled and scrabbled along the ground.

A young man kneeled over me, studying me with a most conflicted look plastered to his face. He couldn't have been more than a couple years older than I was. Nineteen. Maybe twenty.

He looked all rough and tumble, weapons of every sort stuffed into his pack. He wore faded green camouflage pants and black boots, his dingy shirt clinging to his muscles like a second skin. He resembled a renegade soldier with slate grey eyes and chocolate brown hair. He smelled amazing, like wet leather and wood, and flesh and musk. I inhaled him deeply. Oddly enough, he smelled of life.

"Jesus." His wide eyes roamed my body, landing on my neck. "They got to you."

I reached up and touched my neck, finding what felt like two swollen puncture wounds. My fingers came away sticky right before the agonizing cramps set in again. They shattered through me like a brick through glass and I whimpered lethargically.

"John," I moaned before I knew what I was saying.

He leaned in closer. "Who's John? Is he your maker?"

I frowned. "Maker?" I doubled over in pain, hot knives stabbing through my body. I panted after the contraction subsided. "John. My boyfriend."

Or maybe he was my ex-boyfriend now, for I vaguely remembered him breaking up with me. And something about my parents… my dad. The memory was foggy and I couldn't quite put the pieces together.

Roaring shockwaves echoed through the air behind us. "Not anymore he's not," the man said.

"Wait—" Another shock of pain jolted through me, interrupting what I was about to say, forcing a howling curse passed my lips.

The man pulled a gun from his belt and pointed it straight at my head and I blanched. *What the…?* Fear sliced through me like blunt razors, but blurry confusion still held me tight. His face was stern, showing no sign of emotion

whatsoever and I knew in that moment he was going to kill me. But that didn't seem right.

Again, it was like a thought tried to push to the forefront of my mind but couldn't quite make it beyond my scorching pain. I wished he'd just do it already, kill me, for at least in death I might have some respite from this fiery pain.

When I came to after another bought of agony, I looked up into the man's eyes. He seemed perplexed, his expression twisting with confliction.

"Shit." He slid his gun back into his holster. "I'm gonna regret this."

I wondered what it was he would be regretting but was distracted when he placed a woolen blanket over my nakedness. It was scratchy but I sighed with relief for its coverage. He scooped up my body, hoisting me into his arms —arms stronger than even John's— and stood in one swift movement. I sank into the warmth of his embrace, again being hit by a wall of his earthy, spicy smell. I wrapped my hands around his neck, resisting the urge to moan in solace from his comfort. The young man's head turned from side to side, eyes scanning the surrounding area.

I could now see a group of buildings engulfed in fire, the flames licking the sides and spewing from the windows and doors. Debris and small fires littered the ground and I even thought I saw —insane as it sounds— an arm and a leg lying detached on the ground. But everything was a blur and I couldn't be too sure.

Soldiers with weapons drawn, and in uniforms similar to the grey-eyed man, scattered in the opposite direction, the sounds of combat still lingering in the air, although sounding farther away now. It was like the explosions moved of their own accord. But still the fires roared and smoke clouded my vision.

"What is going on?" I gripped my stomach as if it would help subdue the agony.

He took one step and stopped, looking down at me. "Are you strong enough to hold on tight?"

I thought about it for a minute, not knowing if I was strong enough but, figuring I had no other choice, I nodded.

He exhaled a long breath as though relieved and started at a brisk walk. I watched him for a few moments before repeating my earlier question, thinking he either hadn't heard me the first time or didn't care. "What is happening to me?"

"You're turning."

"Turning?"

The man's jaw twitched as though irritated, and he then huffed. "I'll explain later. For now, I need to get you out of here."

I frowned, thinking the soldier with the slate-grey eyes was making no sense. Nothing was making any sense. I didn't even know if I was still in my hometown of Bisbee, Arizona, much less in Arizona at all. But the specific scent of mesquite trees prickled my nose, reassuring me I was at least still in

the desert. I couldn't remember anything, except flashes of a forgotten memory…

Rain. Headlights. Pain. Darkness.

"Hold on tight," my savior said. Without warning, my body jolted, bringing me back from my fragmented memories as the man ran us into the cover of night, away from the fires and echoing booms. My body bounced with his movements, my clumsy arms wrapped around his neck, and my head dropped backward as if I were a broken bobble head.

I felt horrible, like I was dying…

And then it hit me in the face like a slap from God himself and I would've sat bolt upright if my muscles hadn't been made of spaghetti. I remembered now, I was *already* dead. I remembered my mother telling me about my real father, how he'd left her when she was pregnant with me. I remembered John breaking up with me and I remembered the accident. I had *died*, my heart stopping cold and my soul leaving my body. Dead.

And this must be my hell.

It was all making sense now. The pain… the blinding pain, and the fires, a wrath from the underworld in which I would spend the rest of eternity. But confusion filled me over the notion. Didn't one need to have committed some treacherous crime to enter hell?

In life, I hadn't been that bad of a person really. Aside from a raging addiction to banana pudding and reality television, I was quite normal, if not even nicer than most. I babysat for all the neighborhood children, I never cheated on any tests, and I always called to check in if I was late coming home. I was starting college soon, nursing school, and I wanted to help people. To me, that didn't seem so hell-worthy.

I inwardly frowned at myself, thinking I should've never stolen that tube of lip-gloss from the department store when I was fourteen. That was it. That's why I was in hell. I was a horrible, lowly thief and was being punished for my indiscretions.

Another shock of pain rocked my body and I gasped yet again. A howl of grief welled up in the pit of my stomach, but a dirty bandana was stuffed in my mouth before I could even scream. I choked and sputtered, my body twisting and turning in the man's strong arms.

"Shush." He shoved the cloth further into my mouth, making sure I couldn't spit it out. "You need to keep quiet or you'll get us both killed." Killed? Hmm… I thought about that for a minute. One could not be killed if one was already deceased, right? And *I* was already deceased. Clearly this guy had received the wrong memo.

But I strained my thoughts back to the accident, to the tree which crushed my car and, in turn, crushed my body, and I mentally nodded my head. Yep. I was dead as a door nail. I gulped down the fear over my being dead, suddenly gagging on the sweaty cloth in my mouth, my eyes watering from the acrid taste. But I tried to ignore the sweat sandwich I'd been fed, more importantly

focusing on categorizing my disheveled thoughts.

If I was dead it would only be logical that the man with me was dead as well. I looked up at him through squinted eyes and he didn't look like a corpse. On the contrary, he had a fresh scent of life about him, his skin glowing with vigor. His flesh was warm and his steel-grey eyes liquid and alert. His sharp jaw had a lawn of thin stubble growing in patches from lack of upkeep. In all of this madness, I'd somehow managed to appreciate his good looks, though it was hardly the time to be scoping out hot guys, so I shoved the thought to the back of my mind.

What was in the front of my mind though, were questions. So many questions. But my body betrayed my curiosity by writhing and flailing in excruciating damnation like it had a mind of its own, keeping my attention elsewhere. It was all I could do to keep my arms wrapped around his neck and my knees tucked up into my stomach.

The world became silent. The only sounds were my savior's heavy breathing and his footfalls rushing us on, slapping over rocks and cracking through dry branches. The scenery flew by us in swatches of dark greens and browns and blues, the moonlight so bright it highlighted every line and detail of each plant and animal.

I could've sworn I'd even seen a large scorpion with his pointed tail curved upwards in a ready-to-strike position. But that was impossible. No one could see a scorpion in the dead of night, that many feet from the ground and going as fast as we were. I knew, because I used to hunt scorpions with my dad.

Dad. The word shot sorrow through me like a bullet and I couldn't help but be bludgeoned by the fact that he wasn't really my dad now. But yet again, and like all of my other random thoughts, I brushed it away, having bigger concerns at the moment— like where the heck I was, and why I was seeing things like scorpions and dismembered body parts. I shook my head, realizing I must be going crazy. Yep. That was it. I had bought a ticket on the crazy train.

"Let's take a rest for a moment." The man sat me down on top of a flat rock, the roughness scraping against the sensitive, bare skin of my rear. Suddenly highly aware of my nudeness, I tucked the blanket under me and wrapped my arms around my knees, a hot blush crawling up my neck. But if the soldier noticed my embarrassment, he didn't say anything.

I glanced up to the sky, noting that the moon had changed positions from where it was earlier. We must've been running for hours, although time flew by unaccounted for.

The mysterious soldier found his own rock close by and slumped against it, pulling out a canteen and unscrewing the lid. He brought it to his lips, all the while watching me with unwavering eyes, his throat bobbing up and down as he drank. Afterwards, he handed me the canteen.

"Soon, you won't be needing this stuff anymore."

I eyed him while taking a chug from the water. It tasted weird and metallic, and I felt as though drinking it was pointless. I grimaced and handed it back to him.

"No good, huh?" He released a dry chuckle which made me smile, although for the life of me —or un-life, rather— I didn't know where I could possibly find humor in this situation. Here I was, thrown into some sort of different realm of reality, and I was naked to boot. Not my idea of a comedy show.

"Where are you taking me?" Of all the hundreds of questions in my mind, that one seemed the most relevant.

The soldier shifted his position on the rock and checked his watch, the blue glow of it highlighting his chiseled face, yet again making me aware of his masculine beauty. "Some place safe."

"You ever heard of a car before?" Apparently, a recurring habit of mine was words falling from my mouth before thinking. Though his expression was impassive, his grey eyes bored right through me at my sarcastic remark.

I wasn't quite sure about my savior yet, thinking he might just be a figment of my imagination. Maybe he was just a crazy screwed-up dream or the ghost of Christmas past. Who knew. But he seemed all business, cold and mechanical. Though, if he was in fact alive, I couldn't blame him for his detachment. We had just been through a hell-battle after all.

His gaze shifted away from me into the night and I could practically see the wheels turning in his head. "We have to stay off the roadways and out of sight. For now, at least. I've done something really bad."

I flinched, wondering what he could've done that was so bad. I looked him up and down, his gorgeous profile accentuated by the moonlight. Yes, he'd had a gun to my head, but he hadn't pulled the trigger, instead hauling me out of the battle and saving me from the raining debris and fire. I fumbled with the edge of the blanket.

"What have you done?"

A long moment of silence passed before he answered. "I rescued you."

I looked down at my fingers tangled together. Why was rescuing me a bad thing? It suddenly came to my attention I hadn't been in searing pain in a while. The pain still remained —don't get me wrong— but I could at least sit upright now. The handsome stranger clenched his jaw.

"Orders were to kill every vampire on sight."

The force of his words snapped me back to attention. My face drained of color and my heart jackhammered in my chest. Despite my fear, I laughed out loud.

"And you think *I'm* a…vampire?"

He shook his head, his expression serious. "Not yet. But by tomorrow night you will be."

FIVE: GUY

Though the girl was light and petite, my arms were starting to tire from running us through the desert for the better part of two hours, getting us as far away from the ambush as possible. If they found me with her, if I was caught… No, I didn't even want to think about the repercussions I would likely face. I glanced down at her in my arms and frowned.

God, what was I doing? What in the actual hell was I *doing*? I couldn't help but wonder if I'd completely lost my mind and, what's more, wondered what on Earth could've motivated me to make such a rash decision— a decision that could mean the end of my career and, probably, my life.

I guess I hadn't thought it through, somehow letting my emotions take over. But that wasn't like me, I didn't have emotions. Hell, I'd even heard people say I didn't have a heart. All machine. All combat. All killing. I'd had emotions at one point in time, years ago, before I knew better. But that wasn't me anymore.

I stopped momentarily to consider my options, wondering if I'd had a brain hemorrhage or something. Complete darkness covered the sky now, the orange glow from the explosions long gone. Stars twinkled merrily in space as if I hadn't just made the biggest mistake of my life. I could take her back and leave her in the bushes for someone else to find. I could leave her there and reconvene with my men back at headquarters.

I shook my head like I was actually having a conversation with someone else instead of fighting with my own conscience. But my conscience won the battle, telling me I couldn't let anyone else find the girl because she'd talk. She'd tell them what I'd done and I couldn't chance that. The only other option was to kill her, and I'd already proved myself unable to do so. I don't know how many more times I would say it, but, God, what was wrong with me?

Yet again, the girl cried out in pain, bringing me back to my ridiculous reality. I'd have to go on, to find a place to take her and leave her. And I thought I might know just the man. But the old vampire and I had an odd relationship, and I wasn't sure if he would have us. We had an agreement to never speak again. He hated me and I him. That was what enemies were for right? But under the circumstances… just maybe…

It wasn't the best idea, but it was my only option. I'd have to make it

work.

But for now, dawn approached and the girl would need shelter away from the sun. She would need complete darkness.

I tried to recall the map of Bisbee I'd studied for days on end once assigned to this reconnaissance. In my mind, I saw the rough outlines of the small town and the major roads. I saw the warehouse we'd been staking out and the wash we now traveled. There was something up ahead that could offer us shelter, but I couldn't remember what. I hoped we could find it before anyone else found us…

"I can walk now," the girl huffed, irritated. She was hanging onto my neck for dear life, her legs folded over my arm. The blanket barley covered her body, her clothes having been ripped off in one of the warehouse explosions. I tried to avert my eyes.

"Why didn't you say so earlier?" I dropped her like a bag of cement and she *oomphed* upon hitting the ground and rubbed her backside. She shot me a nasty glare and I smirked, amused by her annoyance.

"Here," I said, pulling a couple of rags from my pack. "Tie these onto your feet, or you'll get stickers."

She pulled the blanket closer to her chest, hiding her form beneath as if I might assault her with my eyes. I laughed wryly. Though her beauty was not lost on me, it was the last thing on my mind.

Her angry gaze softened when our eyes met and I wondered if she knew I'd saved her life. I couldn't be sure, but I felt her purple gaze through to the bottom of my toes. I shifted uncomfortably.

"Thank you." She took the squares of white cloth in her small hands and tied them to the soles of her feet.

I took a deep breath and averted my eyes, remaining addled from the precarious situation I'd put us in. But after a moment, I stood up straight and squared my shoulders. Like it or not, this had been my decision after all and I needed to fix it. I took a quick gulp of water and shoved my canteen in my pack.

"Where are we?" she asked, her voice smooth and soft, like fine sand. I studied her face and arms where the wounds had been, but they'd almost completely healed now.

"Just outside of Bisbee." I tightened the laces on my boots and adjusted my pack. "We need to find you some clothes and shelter. Quickly."

I stood and checked our surroundings. We were in the middle of nowhere, the desert sky a wide canopy of darkness and stars that spanned from horizon to horizon without another soul in sight. Just the way I liked it. I felt at peace out in the wilderness alone. But I was not alone this time. I had the girl with me and it was now my job to take care of her.

An agonizing scream snapped my focus back to the girl. She was covering her ears. "It's so loud!" Her flawless face was scrunched up tight and she looked like she was standing against a loud speaker at a rock concert,

trying to block out the pounding noise. But except for the vague melody of crickets and an occasional rustling breeze, the desert was silent.

I recognized what was happening; she was transforming. And from what I knew, it was a torturous feat. Everything in the person's body was on overdrive, their sense of hearing being one of them. The slightest sound was intensified by a hundred and there was little to do to relieve it. But it would pass once her body became acclimated to the venom coursing through her.

"It's part of turning." I shrugged, betraying my distress with false confidence. "You'll get used to it."

She looked up at me, irritated, still muffling her ears. I could tell my casual manner was bothering her and I stifled a grin.

"Do you have a cell phone?" she asked. "Can I call my mom? My boyfriend? I live in Bisbee and—"

"No." I slung my pack over my shoulders and walked on. She ran to catch up, limping and hunching over with pain. I didn't have time for this. I needed to get us somewhere safe.

"No, you don't have a cell phone? Or no, I can't call my family?"

I grunted. When I'd seen her lying there at the warehouse, she'd done something to me, struck a chord inside of me. I'd felt bad for her. But now she was just talking too much.

"I want to go home."

Here we go again. I sighed. "You are a vampire now —or will be soon," I explained, trying to harness a shred of patience, thinking I should've never allowed her to take the gag out of her mouth. "It's against the rules to contact anyone from your previous life. They must still believe you missing." There, now we needed to move. I rushed ahead, coming to a long row of bushes blocking our path.

"So that's it?" She huffed like I'd just given her cereal without milk. "Out of nowhere I become a vampire and now I have no family or friends? What about school? I was supposed start college soon."

I snorted in response. I wasn't her grief counselor nor did I owe her anything, much less an explanation. I'd saved her from permanent death. Wasn't that enough? I pulled out my machete and started whacking at an overgrown patch of dry bramble.

"What's going to happen to me?" she asked when I didn't respond.

This girl was relentless. I released a curt breath and glanced down at her. "Say goodbye to everything you knew before. This is your new life."

We made our way through the brush and into a clearing at the bottom of a hill. She stopped and looked up at me, her demeanor scared and desperate. I couldn't ignore the effect her pleading gaze had on me. Her eyes dropped to the wooden stake hanging on my belt and she stumbled backward as if it would bite her. She placed a hand on her chest.

"You really think I'm a vampire?"

Our gazes locked for one long moment before I latched onto her arm and

pulled her along with me.

"I don't think. I know."

SIX: RUBY

Shock zapped through me like an electric current and I couldn't believe what the soldier had just said to me. He had said I was turning into a vampire. Me. A vampire. If I hadn't been in so much pain, I'd have laughed out loud. The idea was bizarre. Absolutely Looney Toons.

Vampires were creatures of fantasy. They were Halloween costumes and storybook characters. They were cartoons and movies. They were Count Dracula.

They weren't real… were they?

I took in the form of my savior and, at first glance, he seemed a normal soldier, yet on closer inspection, he had more weapons strapped to him than the artillery room at the White House. And the thing that struck me even more than his hefty collection was a single weapon hanging at his side. What kind of soldier carried a wooden stake as protection? My heart pounded when I realized he might be telling the truth and I stumbled over my own feet.

My mind spun, desperate to grasp any shred of reality. I clung to the images that kept flashing through my brain, trying to replay recent events. But other than having a heated argument with my boyfriend and crashing my car, I couldn't remember much other than dying and then waking to searing pain beneath a torrent of fire and explosions. Apparently, there was a huge chunk of time missing from my memory and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't fill in the pieces.

"Come on," he grumbled, clearly annoyed by my presence, and I didn't blame him—I didn't even want to be around myself at the moment. But he glanced over and suddenly stopped, his grey eyes holding something softer and I wondered if it could be sympathy.

Strangely enough I hadn't asked my handsome savior's name, nor had he offered it either. He hadn't even asked me anything about myself, but had scooped me into his arms like a sack of onions and carried me away. The moon had disappeared and it would be light soon, the line of the mountain range growing a hazy pink with the impending dawn. We trudged through a wash and up a steep incline, the rocks piercing through the cloth on my feet and into my skin.

Tears welled in my eyes, but I would not cry. I would find a way out of this. My first instinct was to call my parents and tell them about the crazy

night I'd had, and beg them to come get me. I wanted to tell them I was sorry for the way I'd acted, despite the awful secret they'd kept from me my whole life. In the grand scheme of things, it didn't seem so bad now. But my stomach shrank in on itself when the soldier said I couldn't contact my family. I couldn't help but wonder if he meant for now or forever. Dread clamped around my heart like barbed wire thinking I'd never see my mom and dad again.

The soldier had said we were near Bisbee, my hometown where I'd grown up, the place where I'd died in the crash. But even if I could find my way back home, would they even want me now, with what I'd become? I shook my head, disbelief coursing through me. That was only if this man was telling the truth. I still wasn't sure I could trust him. My brain was on overload, sparking and fuming like a fried circuit board as I tried to figure out what the hell was going on.

"I just… I don't understand what happened." I could barely hear myself think over the cacophony clogging my head; bugs skittering and chirping, our feet crunching, the wind whistling. I clamped my hands to my ears. "How did I become a… a vampire? I was dying. I *died*."

He stopped cold, as though my words struck him as odd. "You died? You weren't taken?"

I shook my head. "I was in a car accident. I died."

He looked as though something bothered him, his face contorting strangely. But his expression melted away and he shrugged. "Well then, you probably did die. But for mere seconds. And then some vampire —God only knows why— decided you should become one of them."

I furrowed my brows, pondering why in the world a vampire would see fit I become a part of their —what would it be? Race? Kind? And why would I not remember this happening to me. And not only was changing into a blood-sucking monster a mind-blowing concept in itself, but the fact they existed in the first place was petrifying.

"Are you one?" I asked my handsome savior whose name I still did not know.

He burst out laughing. "No."

My cheeks flushed, insult stabbing me through the back like an unwieldy axe. If I was in fact going to be a vampire, crazy as it was —and there was apparently nothing I could do about it— the least he could do was show some respect. Otherwise, I might decide it would be *his* blood I'd sample first. Thinking of how I'd do that sampling, I reached up and felt my teeth. No fangs. Just smooth, white pearls, lined up nicely in two neat rows, thanks to the braces I'd endured a couple years ago.

"Well, if you're not a vampire," I said, "then why are you helping me?"

He looked over, a whisper of sincerity crossing his face. "I couldn't bring myself to kill you."

I creased my brows, confused. "But according to you, I'm a vampire.

And you *kill* vampires. So what gives?"

The man said nothing, but kept trudging through the rocky terrain, his shoulders tense. I felt a shift in his mood.

"Why?" I asked again. "Why are you helping me?"

"I couldn't go through that again," he mumbled.

"Go through what?" I asked, frustration raising my voice.

He released a disgruntled breath and scrubbed a hand through his dark hair.

"The reason I didn't kill you was because you're still human."

"Then why did you run off with me like that? Why didn't you just leave me there?"

He huffed. "Because *they* would've killed you."

My heart sank at his troubling words.

"Who's *they*?"

"FUSE soldiers." The man's answers were short and clipped. He didn't want to talk, but I didn't care. I needed answers.

"And these soldiers kill vampires?"

"*We* kill Vampires."

"Do you work for the government?"

"Do you ever shut up?" He shot me an irritated look, but froze when he saw what I clearly felt —a raging bolt of pain slicing through me like a freaking meat cleaver gone wrong.

Shrieking, I collapsed to the ground and tucked up into a ball. Every nerve ending, every muscle and bone in my body felt as though it were ripping, breaking, and blazing with fire. The man got to his knees and placed my head on his lap to keep it off the rocky ground. "Damn it." He rubbed my back with awkward fingers, a small attempt at comfort. After what seemed an eternity, the pain ebbed a little, leaving me gasping for air.

"This is only temporary." Again, he awkwardly rubbed my back as if he'd never done such a thing before. Although the man was a complete stranger, his presence comforted me, his fingers a soothing balm on my aching skin. My flesh pebbled with shivers, something I might have mistaken for pleasure traveling through me. But a ball of emotion expanded in my chest, ready to burst.

"I don't know what to think." I covered my face with my hands, holding back tears. "I lost my family once already when I died, and now you're telling me I'm losing them again. And I'm turning into this creature that should only exist in storybooks." Guilt rippled through me, streams of tears bursting from my eyes. "This is crazy. It's insane." I didn't know how many times I'd said it, but I was sure it wouldn't be the last. I looked up into his storm-cloud eyes and blinked. "Who are you? I don't even know your name."

The man clenched his jaw and gazed down at me. He pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to me.

"Guy."

"Guy what?"

"Guy Stone. I'm a Captain of the FUSE army." I looked up at him, but before I could ask any more questions, he explained further. "FUSE stands for the Faction of Unfortunate Souls Elimination. We are a secret sect of the government whose main goal is to exterminate Unfortunate Souls."

I wiped my eyes and blew my nose into the hankie. "Unfortunate Souls?"

He paused, rubbing his hands over his face. I got the feeling he was revealing more information to me than he should. But he continued.

"Vampires, Witches, Werewolves —or as we call them— the Unfortunate Souls." A mix of emotions claimed his features. His face was hard with determination, but soft with the element of youth. There were no wrinkles or lines, only patches of unshaven stubble over his otherwise smooth skin. I reached up and touched his bristled cheek.

"You're so young to be a Captain." I remarked. He shrugged off my touch as if I'd stung him. I dropped my hand, embarrassment heating my cheeks.

"I'm good at what I do," he said, rifling through his pack.

I brushed off Guy's coldness and watched the darkness fade, the sky turning from a dim pink to a burnt sienna. I dropped my eyes and stared at the ground in a trance, trying to wrap my mind around the situation, still reeling over what he'd said. What I was becoming. It was insane and I was desperate to fill in the missing pieces in my memory on how I'd come to be this way, but couldn't.

"Can you walk again?" he asked, bringing me from my thoughts. I nodded, pulling the blanket closer to my chest. At a time such as this, my modesty almost seemed funny. *Almost*. But thankfully Guy didn't mock me, instead helping me off the ground, although quite roughly I had to admit. "The sun's coming. We need to hurry."

His expression spoke of urgency and it made me uneasy. But for some reason, though I wasn't sure why, I trusted Guy Stone.

Without another word, he took my hand and we trotted through the desert. A few minutes later, we edged up a hill and stopped at the top. Over the other side sat a crumbling Spanish Catholic Mission, the three white arches at the top holding copper bells. It loomed tall with its three-story façade, and it shone a bright white against the dusky desert. Guy slid me a glance.

"We've run out of time. I hope you like going to church."

SEVEN: RUBY

I stood next to Guy at the crest of a hill, my mind still spinning with this newfound information. My body quaked with pain and I began to give credit to the soldier's words telling me I was turning into a vampire. Though it was completely insane, I couldn't ignore what my body was telling me. I was in fact changing, my senses heightening, and I'd never felt anything so strange before in my entire life.

We gazed down over the desert landscape to the large mission before us. Patches of cacti surrounded it, their white and yellow blooms opening right before my eyes, each petal yawning wide as though searching for the sleeping sun. Little black bugs dotted the blooms, enjoying their temporary sanctuary.

My enhanced vision astounded me. I could see farther than I ever could as a human and the detail of everything was so precise. So beautiful. The church's tall white walls turned peach with the oncoming sunrise and I could see the rough texture on the adobe as though I was standing right before it.

I glanced at my savior, next to me.

Guy Stone.

He was apparently the Captain of some strange secret army, whose goal was to kill people like me, *vampires* like me. I laughed nervously at the unreal thought, wondering if I really believed I was a vampire. There was something different about me, that was for sure. My body was changing, my senses blazing like a neon light, pain flushing through me in hot rivers. But a vampire? I shook my head in disbelief as Guy latched onto my arm.

He rushed me down the hill and up to the grand entrance, the wooden arched doorway closed in front of us. He tried the wrought iron handle but the door didn't budge. He turned behind us to the east and frowned at the rising sun. Still holding the handle, he placed his foot against the door for leverage and pushed. It creaked but did not move.

"Damn it." He shoved and pushed at the door. He jiggled the handle, to no avail.

"Am I going to burn in the sun?" I asked. Everyone knew the old lore of how vampires would fry in the sun and could only be killed by that or a stake through the heart. But now that I was turning into one of these fabled creatures, I figured I needed to know if it was true.

"Yes." He maneuvered himself against the doorframe, his muscles

bulging underneath his tight T-shirt. Like an egg in a frying pan, an overwhelming sense of heat rushed through me. Was it the sun making me feel this way? Or the way my savior's strong body affected me? Either way, fire flushed my face, my forehead dotting with sweat. I glanced to the horizon, panting from the heat.

"I am a little warm."

Guy leaned over with hands on his knees, exhausted from his failed efforts. He glanced up at me with concern in his eyes, watching me rub the sweat from my face. He considered me for a moment, then sharply spoke.

"Stand aside."

I hurried away from the door and Guy backed up at least ten paces, giving himself a running start. Before reaching his target, he jumped, bringing his legs up to kick the door with both feet. It burst open with a spray of dust. He stumbled backwards, but recovered, grabbing my arm and throwing me inside. Before he closed the door behind us, I glanced out on the desert scene, the colossal mountains like purple giants under the rising sun. I realized that if I was indeed going to be a vampire and Guy was telling the truth, this would be the last sunrise I would ever see.

The reality of my situation slammed home, the truth of my condemnation seeping through my body like the flames from the hot sun. I'd never see my family again. Never see John again. My heart constricted at the severity of what I'd done and it took all I had not to drop to my knees and break down. I was the only one to blame for my own death.

The great ball of fire peeked over the ridge, illuminating the landscape with its orange light. And my eyes —whether from the pain of the sun or the true understanding of my hopelessness— misted at the sight of it. Guy shoved me aside and slammed the door, throwing us into near darkness.

He found a few candles on a nearby bench and lit them, their light casting a soft glow within the church. My eyes adapted and I gaped at the scenery surrounding us. The walls of the mission were not square and box-like, but rounded and curved, their concave facades adorned with patterns of gold gilt. Faded paintings of saints hung tall in golden arches and white carved statues were tucked into every crevice, their faces hollow and forlorn in the shadows.

The ceilings loomed tall, the room spanned vast, and dust motes glittered through the air. Long wooden benches lined the center of the nave and the back of the long church disappeared into the shadows. Even in my own Catholic upbringing, I'd never been to a place such as this, and I gasped in spite of myself.

Guy took me by the arm and walked me down the aisle beside the benches. "There will be too much light through the windows once the sun gains a stronger position."

I don't know what made me do it —probably my dire circumstance or possibly my desperation— but I dropped to one knee at the nearest pew,

crossing my body with the sign of the holy trinity. Forehead. Breastbone. Left shoulder. Right shoulder.

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and The Holy Ghost."

I'd occasionally attended mass growing up but had never been super religious or anything. But I figured if I was damned to hell on earth in the body of a vampire, I should at least atone for my sins first. Guy watched me bring my fingers to my lips and kiss them, a symbol of faith my grandmother had taught me when I was young. He spiked an eyebrow.

"Seriously?"

I looked up at him and held the blanket tight around my body. "I haven't been to mass in a long time. But it seemed the right thing to do."

Guy snorted and my face flushed even hotter than it did in the sun. I stood, appalled at the audacity of his blasé reaction to my last moments as a human. I narrowed my eyes, wondering how he found even a shred of humor in this situation.

"What?"

"A Catholic Vampire," he chuckled. "Now I've seen it all."

I scoffed as he yanked me from my knees and pulled me toward the back of the church. My neck throbbed from the mysterious bite wound and, despite the wrappings on my feet, my soles were stinging from lack of protection while running through the desert.

"Here." Guy threw open a pair of carved wooden doors. He lit a candle and held it into the doorway. "You'll sleep in here for the day." I glanced inside the dark little room and studied my options, which, unfortunately, were none. I looked back over my shoulder at the florid church scenery, and a statue of the mother Mary caught my eye. She held her hands to her chest, tears flowing down her cheeks.

"Alright, Faith." Guy brought back my attention by pushing me through the door. "It's time to hibernate."

"Ruby," I grumbled, letting Guy cram me into the small room. He set the candle on an old baroque desk. Next to that stood a rickety wooden chair and an old shelf holding dozens of dusty books. There were no windows, and only a filthy rug spanned the floor. "My name is Ruby," I repeated, this time with guff. "Ruby Carter. In case you didn't catch it the first time."

"Ruby's nice." He flashed me a bawdy grin. "But I like Faith better."

This man irritated me and I snorted with frustration. He seemed amused by my reaction and, smiling, turned to grab a white robe from a peg on the wall. He handed it to me. "Put this on."

I ran the silky material between my fingers and recognized it as an altar boy's robe. But it must've been at least fifty years old. The white silk had turned a worn shade of cream, and delicate patterns of lace trimmed the hem and sleeves.

Guy turned away and faced the door to give me privacy. I glared at him for a moment before letting my blanket fall to the floor. I slid the robe over

my head and thrust my arms into the sleeves. It hung just above my knees and looked like a vintage nightgown. It wasn't my first choice of clothing, but it was definitely better than spending the whole day nude with Captain Impossible.

"You can look now," I huffed and sat on the rug, removing the bloody rags from my feet. He turned back around, his muscular form flickering yellow from the candle light. His grey eyes darkened as he studied me.

"Put your arms out." He held out his own in front of him as an example. I cocked an eyebrow at his strange request. "Just do it," he grumbled and I did as he said. He then knelt in front of me and grabbed my wrists in one of his hands. He reached behind himself with his other arm and brought forth a pair of clunky, metal restraints. I gasped, disbelief stunting my breath.

"Are you hand-cuffing me?"

"Yes." His voice sounded flat, unaffected by my shock.

"But… I haven't done anything wrong." Panic rose in my chest like the ocean's high tide but he clamped the metal bracelets over my wrists and cinched them in tight, tugging on them to make sure of his work. I grimaced. So much for being saved by Prince Charming.

Guy leaned back and frowned. "By the time you wake tonight, you will be a full-fledged vampire. I can't take any chances."

I gazed up into his steely eyes, the sassy attitude I'd adopted earlier melting away, leaving fear in its place. Desperation coursed through my shaking body. "Will you stay with me?" I was afraid he'd leave me alone.

He considered my words for a moment, his expression unreadable. "Do you want me to?" His voice was low and husky.

"Yes." I looked down at my wrists, somber. Though I'd only met the man less than twenty-four hours ago and thought him annoying and abrasive, I needed him. I needed *someone*. I felt alone and I hated to admit it, but terror wracked my insides like a rusty washboard. Despite his cold manner, his company would be welcome and I finally admitted with a whisper. "I'm scared."

Guy sighed and grabbed the bloody cloths that had been wrapped around my feet. He stuffed them in between each one of my wrists and the cuffs binding them. I looked up at him in question.

"The cuffs are silver," he explained. "Silver weakens a vampire's strength so they cannot escape, but it might burn in the process. The rags should relieve some of the pain."

I looked down in awe. "And if they were not silver?"

"Depending on how strong a vampire you become, you might be able to break through anything that's not silver."

"Oh." I rubbed my fingers over the metal.

"Now lie down and try to get some sleep. The next twelve hours will be the hardest of all."

I gazed at him, pondering his words. If the next twelve hours would be

the hardest, then what had I been feeling for the last four? I shivered with dread.

He must've sensed my fright because he placed a hand on my shoulder. "It'll be alright. You'll get through it. And you won't be alone."

I raised my brows in surprise at his sudden kindness. Although I had no reason to trust him, Guy's words comforted me. His fingers lingered on my shoulder, our eyes locking, and for one short moment, I saw beyond his gruff exterior, warmth traveling through me like a soothing bath. But he swiftly retracted his hand as though embarrassed.

"Now go on. Lay down and try to get some shut eye."

I looked up at him, the ghost of a smile crossing my lips. Maybe he wasn't such a jerk after all. I laid down on the rug and pondered the Captain who'd rescued me. There was something strong and powerful about him, yet soft and warm. I felt safe with him, unlike I ever had with John.

Guy sat himself in the old wooden chair against the wall, kicked off his boots, and propped his feet up on the desk. He grabbed the sharp wooden stake from his belt and, with it in hand, rested his arm on his stomach. He eyed me as he did so and I wondered if he considered me a threat, knowing he eventually would once I grew fangs.

He leaned forward, blew out the candle, and settled back against the wall. Darkness veiled my sight and questions about Guy and his intentions fled. But even in the pitch black, and beyond the stabs of pain, I marveled at the difference in my eyesight which grew sharper by the moment. Shadows became lines, which then became shapes and dim shades of grey. Guy's body was reclined, but I could tell he wasn't relaxed; his muscles thick with tension.

Again, I thought about my family, feeling awful for the way I'd left them. And now, more than likely, they thought I was dead. Grief tied my stomach into a knot and I struggled to breath. Though I knew the likely answer to my next question, I asked it anyway, breaking the silence.

"Can I just make one call to my parents?"

"No," Guy grumbled.

I sighed, finally submitting to the fact that my life had officially changed.

"So when I wake up I will be a vampire?"

"Yes."

"Will I need to drink blood?"

"Yes," he answered sharply.

I shifted uncomfortably on the floor, dull pain throbbing down my spine. I wondered what my life would be like as a vampire. I wondered how much of me would change. I wondered what would happen once the sun set that night. I gazed at Guy through the dark. His eyes were closed.

"Since I will be a vampire, are you going to kill me?"

"If you ask me one more question I'm likely to kill you right now."

I rolled over to the side, a giggle leaving my mouth. His words weren't

threatening, but they teased comfortably. I was pretty sure if he hadn't killed me by now he wouldn't kill me in my sleep. But tonight, when I awoke as a vampire, I wasn't so sure. I glanced back over my shoulder.

"Goodnight, Guy."

And though I wasn't quite sure, I thought I saw his lips curl into a boyish smile.

"Goodnight Faith."

EIGHT: RUBY

The back of my skull throbbed as though I'd been cracked with a bat, my neck throbbed from the bite wound and, as unlikely as it seemed, even my skin throbbed against the hard church floor. But through my pain, my body finally succumbed to exhaustion and I managed to drift off into a foggy place between sleep and awake.

And through the mist came flashes of recent days. They were broken and fragmented, hazy at best, swirling around me in a cyclone of missing information. But through the chaos, my mother's voice came through clearly. I remembered the moments leading up to my death…

"We understand that you're upset honey. It's a normal reaction."

"What?" I took a shallow breath, then struggled to take another. "You're saying that my dad isn't really my dad?" My eyes shifted quickly between my parents' faces, trying to process what they were telling me.

"That's not what we're saying, honey. Mom took Dad's hand— or rather, took the man's hand who I'd thought was my dad all these years. The setting sun cast light through my window and shone on their worried faces. Together, they sat facing me on my bed. Unease tumbled into my gut like heavy rocks as I sat across from them in my favorite chair, but it lent me no comfort that evening. Mom inhaled deeply, offering my 'dad' a glance before looking back to me.

"You're dad has always been, and will always be, your dad. He loves you more than you could ever know."

My heart pumped faster than it ever had, my face heating with a sense of betrayal. I glanced at my 'dad,' hot anger bubbling up in my stomach.

"If you're not my real dad, then who is?"

He opened his mouth as if to speak, but mom squeezed his hand, stopping him.

"Your biological father left when I was four months pregnant with you. And I never heard from him again."

"Why?" I blurted out, my voice cracking. "Why did he leave us?" I studied my mother, drilling into her eyes with mine as though I could see into the past, as though all of the answers lay hidden there beneath her brown irises. Her gaze faltered and she looked down at her lap. After one long moment she glanced back up.

"Honestly, Ruby, I don't know. But what I do know is that the man who's loved you more than words and been there through it all, sits right here in front of you." Again, she squeezed his hand.

He gazed at me, his eyes soft with sympathy. He cleared his throat, his voice raspy. "She's right Ruby. Blood doesn't matter. What matters is that I'm your dad and you're my daughter. We're a family, and I love you very much."

I stared at him in disbelief, my heart hammering hard inside my chest. I studied his face, a face I'd never realized looked nothing like mine. His eyes were green, where mine were brown. His hair was dark, where mine was light. His face was long, where mine was round. How had I never known? How had I been so foolish to think I was his real daughter, when in all actuality there was some other man out there who'd made me? The thought of my mother being with another man disgusted me, causing my blood to boil like molten lava in my veins.

Not only did I not know the man who sat across from me anymore, claiming to be my dad, I had been lied to my entire life. I didn't want their sympathy. I didn't want anything from them, except the truth. A raging fire blazed from the soles of my feet to the top of my head and I shot from my seat, tears pooling in my eyes.

"Why now?" I cried. "Why now when I'm just about to turn eighteen years old?" My chest trembled, holding back a sob. "Why not tell me when I was younger? When I could've had time to process this?"

Dad tried on a smile, but it didn't look sincere. "We did what we thought was best."

"Yes, honey," mom added. "We wanted to wait until we felt you were old enough to handle this. And we understand that you're upset."

Upset? *Upset?* Oh, I was more than upset. The nerve of them, lying to their only child all of this time. A ball of heat expanded in my middle, threatening to explode. I released a loud scoff.

"Seventeen years!" I cried, my voice sounding shrill. "You waited that long, why didn't you just keep it to yourselves forever? Why didn't you just keep lying to me for the rest of my life? Apparently, you're very good at it."

"Ruby it's not like that."

Both my parents stood, raising their hands as if to calm me. But I wasn't having it.

"What is it then? Tell me? If not a monstrous lie, then what is this?"

I didn't wait for a reply, but bolted out my bedroom door.

I vaguely remembered them trying to stop me as I flew down the stairs. I vaguely remember ignoring their words, wishing them to go to hell. I raced out into the evening, away from the people who'd betrayed me. Away from the people who claimed to be my parents for far too long.

I'd never felt so hurt and so angry in my entire life. There was a hole in my heart, one which I feared would never heal again. All I'd ever wanted was

to feel accepted, to feel loved, and at that moment, I felt neither.

Reality slammed into me by the torrent of pain blasting my insides. I rocked myself against the growing torture. I was back in the Spanish-Catholic mission, Guy sleeping in the chair against the wall. The small room slowly came into focus, but once it did the painful images crashed into my brain like a faulty strobe light. I squinted my eyes and curled my fists, the pain increasing fiercer than before. I wailed, my body flinging itself about on the floor, having no control. Every part of me hurt and torturous agony came in blazes.

"Make it stop!" My voice rang a higher pitch than I ever thought possible and in an instant Guy was kneeling at my side.

"Just breathe. It will soon pass." His soothing manner surprised me. The way his conflicted eyes stared down at me dug deep into my heart. His brows were creased with worry and I wondered if he actually cared what happened to me and what I was going through. Beyond the physical torture I endured, did he know the mental pain I held at losing my family—not to mention the boy I'd loved my whole life?

I barely had time to wonder before bursts of blinding light spider-webbed beneath my lids. I covered my eyes with my palms and flailed about, my hands still bound together with the cuffs.

"Remember…" Guy's voice broke through the pain like a cool rain. "This is only temporary."

"Temporary…" I panted. My ears rang with the sounds of a thousand screeching children. So loud. I had always loved children, always overjoyed by their laughter, but now I just wanted to punch every single one of the little jerks screaming in my ears. I tucked my head as though it would thwart the sound, but it only grew louder. Tears spilled down my cheeks.

"Faith. Look at me."

I tried, but a bolt of lightning planted itself in my spine and shot down to my limbs, fingers and toes. I whimpered. What on earth did I do to deserve this? Was it a punishment of some sort? Had I won the God hates you and wants to smite you lottery? I howled again, Guy grabbing me into his arms. He held me tight against my involuntary thrashing.

"Ssshh," he hushed. But that was easier said than done. I tried to reel myself in, tried to control my movements, but it was impossible. I kicked and squirmed wildly against the pain and Guy squeezed his arms tighter around me.

"Faith… look at me."

It took everything I had, but I twisted my neck and found his eyes. Soft, grey eyes.

"Focus on me. I'm right here with you."

His gaze was full of hurt at having to watch me go through this, but I could also see the strength in him. I kept my eyes locked on his and, as though he was lending me his strength, the pain ebbed and became more tolerable. I

panted and moaned in his arms, my body shivering with cold.

"I'm f… f… freezing." All of a sudden, my body felt as though it was submerged in freaking ice.

"It's part of it." Guy grabbed the woolen blanket and wrapped it snug around me. I noticed how careful and gentle he was, very much unlike before. My head lay in his lap and he gently pulled my hair away from my face. My lips trembled and teeth chattered.

I wished I knew what had caused this in the first place, who had changed me into this… *thing*. Then maybe it would help me to get through it. But the missing piece in my memory held firm and I submitted to the pain.

"W… when will it stop?" I wondered aloud. God, I wished he could make it stop. I wished this was all just some horrid nightmare and I would awaken in my own bed. I would hug my mom and dad, telling them I was sorry for storming out like that. Tell them that I loved them no matter what our circumstances.

Guy frowned and stroked the side of my cheek with his thumb. His sudden affection was not lost on me, but the comfort was short-lived. It was all I could do to listen to his voice without wailing. My body shook and shivered.

"I'm not sure exactly," he replied, studying my face. "But I've heard that once you've been infected, the effects should subside when the next sun sets."

"How long?" I breathed.

He looked down and pressed a button on his watch, the blue glow highlighting his strong jawline and the stubble across it. "Ten more hours, give or take."

I wondered if I could get through it and how on Earth could I survive ten more hours. It felt like an eternity had already passed and we'd only just begun. My muscles quivered with cold and my teeth clattered together.

"I feel like I'm going to f… freeze to death. Are there anymore b… blankets?"

"No." Guy looked down at me and sighed. After a moment, he shook his head as though about to do something he might regret. He moved to the floor and lay down behind me, cupping my body with his. His warm arms wrapped around me. I raised my brows in surprise, but didn't complain. It was the best sensation I'd had all night— or day. Was it daytime? I wasn't sure anymore.

"Thank you."

I wondered what had caused his sudden stroke of compassion and if I'd been right about him having a softer side. I wondered who he was, this man that was cold as ice one minute, and soothing as warm blankets the next. We lay there a while in the pitch black, our soft breathing the only sound.

"T… talk to me." My teeth chattered violently and I was afraid if I spoke any louder it would hurt. "T…tell me about yourself." I thought if I listened to him talk, it might offer a distraction. Heck, I'd try anything at this point.

Guy shifted behind me, the pure strength of his chest pressing up against

my back. His arms were smooth, like solid rocks holding me tight.

"What do you want to know?" His breath in my hair sent shivers down my spine and the faint scent of his crisp aftershave calmed my senses.

"The truth." I wanted to know more. I needed answers, just like I'd needed answers from my parents. "W…why did you save me?"

A strained silence fell between us and I knew I'd struck a chord. But I didn't care, and it was the first question that came to mind.

"It's a long story."

"T… ten hours," I said in regards to the amount of time we still had left. Ten hours before this torture was over. Ten hours before I was a vampire. I gritted my teeth against the cold.

He inhaled, the rise in his chest pushing against my back. He eased out the air and began. "There was this girl…"

Of course. That's how the story usually begins; a girl. I waited in the silence for him to continue. He paused, gathering his thoughts, weighing his words strategically, just like I assumed he did everything.

"Her name was Lily." His body tensed when he spoke her name, obviously a sore subject. "I was young. Had just finished boot camp. I didn't go to college like my dad wanted, but enrolled in the military straight after high school."

I focused on Guy's voice, the low tenor of it, the calming effect it had on me. He took another slow breath before continuing.

"I never liked being around people and never usually went into town. But when I did, I'd have coffee at a local diner in Sierra Vista. That's where we met. She was a freshman in college, a journalism student. She wanted to know about me. She wanted to interview me on the effects of military on youth. I didn't want anything to do with her but she was relentless. Day after day, she'd try to talk to me. And day after day, I'd ignore her. I wondered what she saw in me or why she wanted to interview me. Maybe because of the challenge I posed?"

His arms snaked tighter around me, encasing my body in their warmth. The icy coldness subsided and I melted into him, unbelieving that he was opening up to me like this. When I asked him to talk to me, I'd have settled on the weather, but this was just as good. No, it was better. I was finally seeing another side of Guy, a side I suspected, not many people saw.

"Anyway," he continued, his voice deep and husky. "I finally gave in. I told her she could interview me, but only if it was on my terms. She agreed. I took her to my campsite, the desert I would frequent on the weekends when I was off duty. I was a private in the army then and was more concerned about my training than having friends. I would rather live as a survivalist."

I instantly pictured Guy out in the desert in his combat gear, much like the way I'd seen him the night before when he'd rescued me —Camo pants, black boots, tight shirt stained with mud. Not a bad image, if I do say so myself. Guy shifted, causing me to shake off my visions of his strong appeal.

He propped himself up on an elbow.

"So she came along with me and saw how I lived my life. How I liked to be alone out in the wilderness, only the stars and me. The big open spaces. I was free out there. Free to be myself. I thought if I let her see my simple existence, the way I liked to rough the elements, she'd finally leave me alone. I mean, what girl wanted to hunt rabbits and chop wood? But she stayed with me for two days and three nights, scribbling in her journal, barely saying a word. And then she came back the next weekend, and the next. And our two-day interview was long gone and it was nearing the end of summer. I ended up falling for her. She was the first person I could open up to without judgment. She *got* me. And I got her. Right when I considered asking her to move in with me, possibly even marry me, she was taken from me."

He fell silent for a moment, leaving me wild with curiosity. I wondered where his Lily had been taken and by whom. And what was it about her that affected him so deeply.

"She was taken from me…" his chest expanded with breath against my back, "by a vampire."

His words hit me like a gong. I got it. It all made sense. I'd only known Guy Stone for less than a day, but I understood him now. I understood why he was the way he was. Cold, distant, and, last but not least, a vampire killer. Complex emotions washed over me, compassion and guilt combined.

"And that's why you now work for FUSE? Revenge?"

He said nothing, but nodded in confirmation. All at once— as if I were the one personally to blame for his love's disappearance— guilt shattered my heart like a vase thrown against a wall.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "It must've been horrible…"

"It's okay. It was a long time ago."

I wondered exactly how long he meant. It couldn't have been more than a few years for he was only a couple of years older than I was. I was sure of it. The pain of his loss echoed through me and I could tell he used care in planning his next words.

"And when I saw you there on the ground all alone… it was like it was happening all over again. I couldn't let them kill you." Something about his voice rang different now. He was no longer the jerk he had been to me earlier. He was softer somehow.

"Thank you," I breathed.

But the distraction his words offered was abruptly forgotten as another bout of cramps traveled through me. Guy leaned over me, his eyes grim and his face tight with worry.

"Don't thank me now. We're still not out of the woods yet."

NINE: RUBY

Pain had me lifting my lashes, the whispers of a troubled dream I couldn't recall fading away like a blown-out birthday candle. I wriggled uncomfortably, my stomach wrenching in on itself as though mocking my terrible situation. I couldn't tell how long it had been since entering the old mission, but it seemed an eternity. Guy lay with me on the floor, one of his arms flung over my shoulder, his hand dangling in front of my face. His breathing was slow and even and I figured we must've dozed off at some point.

I was no longer cold, the heat of his body behind mine warm and cozy. A flush crossed my cheeks at the idea of being so close to him and I was surprised by how much I enjoyed the pressure of his chest against my back. But the pain in my stomach diverted my attention and I squirmed again, my insides twisting and churning.

Awakening, Guy bolted upright, his fingers wrapping gently around my arm. He leaned over me.

"Are you okay?" he asked, and his voice was laden with sleep. He squinted his eyes and stared, unseeing, in the darkness. But I could see him perfectly. His mussed hair stuck out in every direction and he looked oddly adorable.

I nodded, but pain shot through my core, slicing through me like a hot knife. Noting this, Guy tried to distract me.

"What about you? You didn't tell me your story…" He laid down and wrapped his arms around me again when I started to jerk.

Hmm… My story. Along with the pain of my transformation, a deep sorrow bled through me like toxic poison. Before— only a few days back— I'd had a good story. A good life. I'd had a normal family who loved me and a boyfriend I could count on— not to mention that I'd been human then. But now… now it was all gone like dust on the wisp of a breeze. My story was a sad one now. A story I wasn't sure I wanted to share the details of. Again, hot blades cut deep into my back and I arched my neck in restraint. I tried to focus on his question. His question about my story.

"My… my name is Ruby —*not Faith*." Guy chuckled and I couldn't help but smile through the pain. "I… I had a pretty normal life before. A *good* life...." I moaned, unable to finish the sentence, agony coursing through my

body.

"What else?" His deep voice brought my attention back to the conversation. "Tell me what was so good."

I sucked in a gulp of air, warding off the needles stabbing my insides.

"I don't know. I… I always enjoyed school. I play piano —*played* piano." I wondered when I'd ever get over the fact that I was a vampire and things would never be the same.

"You could still play," Guy offered.

I snorted. "A piano-playing vampire?" The idea was bizarre and comical. I imagined a circus act of clown-clad vampires, red noses and all, playing instruments and performing different tricks. I laughed out loud at the thought.

"I don't see why not." I felt him shrug. "We've apprehended vampires that worked in all different facets of the community. Some were bartenders and some cops. Why not a pianist?"

I shook my head, realizing our silly conversation was helping to subdue the pain. "I don't know. I guess it just sounds funny."

Guy sighed and his body relaxed against me. I nestled up into him, realizing I didn't want our time together to end. Not yet. Not when it meant I would have to face the world as a blood-sucking monster.

"What else?" Guy insisted. "What makes Faith… *Faith*?

I let out an annoyed breath. He was well aware of my name but for some reason insisted on calling me Faith. I chuckled inwardly. Whatever. I wouldn't let it bother me. Not when I was finally starting to feel a little better.

"Um… I always wanted to be like my mom. She's a nurse. She's so beautiful… and the most caring person I've ever met." A sudden pang of sadness struck me square in the chest at the thought of losing her. "I miss her…"

"You said you were enrolled in college?" Guy interjected, trying to get away from a touchy subject; the reality that I was never going to see my family again. I thought of how awful our last conversation had been, the last conversation we would ever have. Grief sank its sharp teeth into my heart, but I shrugged off the sour feeling, playing into Guy's diversion. I was more than okay with it.

"Yes. I wanted to be a nurse. I was supposed to start this semester, but… then I *died* and all." I smiled, maybe finally accepting this crazy situation. "I guess that'll put a damper on anyone's plans."

Guy huffed with amusement. He kept silent for a long moment, mulling over what I'd said. But before he could speak, an electric bolt jolted through my body, pushing a scream from my mouth, my legs shooting out straight in front of me. Guy pulled me in closer, tighter, and brushed my hair back with his fingers. It felt like I'd drunk hazardous chemicals and they were traveling though my bloodstream, toxic and grotesque. I panted, the contractions taking my breath away. Sweat beaded my forehead.

"You said you had a boyfriend. What was his name again?" Guy was

trying to distract me again. But bringing up the man who'd crushed my heart in my direst time of need wasn't my idea of a good distraction.

"John." I all but growled his name, hating the sound of it. "John Rodgers. We grew up together."

The searing pain crashed through me more viciously this time and I couldn't take it anymore. I let out a belting curse. My body jolted and thrashed again, bucking like a wild animal.

"Faith… just concentrate." Guy's tone reminded me of soft, rolling thunder, his arms still wrapped around me from behind. "Concentrate on my voice."

"I'm… trying." Flashes of light blinded my eyes and loud screeches rang through my ears. My bones felt like they were breaking, every single one of them. Fire consumed my skin and my muscles cramped like a son of a bitch. I'd thought dying was bad, but compared to this, it was nothing.

I released a slew of undiscernible vowel sounds, my legs flailing about, and kicked over the nearby chair. Guy climbed atop of me, holding me down, his body wrapped around me like a hot blanket, and I squirmed for the discomfort of my handcuffs jammed between our bodies. But after a few moments, my pain subsided and Guy shifted so I could unpin my wrists, but he did not get off of me, instead leaning in close, his face a mere inch from mine.

"It's okay." Even in the dark I could see the sincerity in his eyes, feel his breath on my face. "It's going to be all right."

His nose was nearly touching mine, our eyes locking. We were so close that for a moment I thought he might kiss me. But instead of the imagined tender moment that was preposterous even in its consideration, I vomited. Right on his face.

Puke ran down his eyes and chin only to drip back onto me. He stared at me for a moment, frozen. I wasn't sure if he was going to punch me, gag, or vomit himself.

I bit my lower lip in embarrassment. "I feel better now."

He blinked, his face covered in slime, and I laughed in spite of myself as he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe off the sickness.

"Good. I'm glad." His mouth peeled into a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes, and I imagined he thought I was pretty disgusting. I didn't blame him, I *was* absolutely disgusting.

But I stared into his grey gaze for what seemed forever and felt myself getting lost there, the pain wafting away. The young man before me was the most handsome I'd ever seen and I felt myself being drawn into him— even with the remnants of my throw-up on his face. It could've just been because we'd been thrown into this unfortunate situation together, and being in such close quarters for all this time, it could've happened to anyone. But it was different somehow, unique. It was a connection of sorts, like none I'd ever had before, and I knew he felt it too.

"Now that you've puked on me," Guy stated. "It's only fair I call you what I want… *Faith*."

I rolled my eyes, knowing he couldn't see me as well as I could him. "Why do you insist on changing my name?"

He shifted his position on the floor and laid on his side so we faced each other, propping himself on his elbow, showing a mound of bicep muscle. He stared down at me with hooded eyes. "Because, you don't look like a Ruby to me."

"Maybe that's because you've only met me since I've been a vampire. My name fit me just fine before."

"Perhaps." I studied the flecks in his eyes, dark blue on grey, and after one long moment, blinked free of their hold.

"Why 'Faith' though? Why not Fangs or Count Dracula?" In my opinion, those were more appropriate nick names.

He regarded me, his eyes sparkling like the stormy sea. "For someone who's just been damned to Earth for all eternity, you still got to your knees to pray. You have faith and I've never seen anything like it."

The sentiment warmed me and I smiled.

"Okay, fine." I fluttered my lashes playfully. "But if you get to call me Faith then I get to call you Captain Impossible."

He snorted. "Whatever appeases you, Faith." This time his grin reached his eyes, a full on smile.

TEN: GUY

I sat in the old wooden chair, leaning back against the wall, my legs propped on top of the desk. Exasperated, I removed my hand from the wooden stake at my side and glanced down at the sleeping vampire, though it was pitch black and I could only see her outline. It had been hours since coming into the room, but Ruby had finally drifted off into what I assumed was a very deep sleep.

The day spent in the small church room had been long and relentless. I'd tried my hardest to soothe Ruby through her transformation, but who the hell was I kidding, I had no idea what to do. Still, there was no mistaking the connection I had to her, one I was having trouble admitting to. Yet somehow she'd made it easy for me to open up to her and reveal information I'd never told anyone, like re-opening a wound. But instead of scorning me, Ruby had listened as though she really cared and the thought made me uncomfortable.

Since that night long ago, the night that changed my entire life when I lost Lily, I'd vowed never to let my guard down again, building a brick wall around myself to keep myself safe. But I wondered why I felt so compelled to let that wall down around Ruby. What was it about her that made me *feel*? I wasn't sure, but I didn't like it, thinking it made me vulnerable and weak. Not like the hardened man I had molded myself to be. I sighed and leaned forward from my chair, lighting the candle on the desk. The little room took on a yellow glow.

I shifted my gaze down to Ruby, lying on the floor so still she could've been mistaken for dead. She was in the final stages of turning. Her irises, which had been brown, were now a deep shade of violet. Her hair, which before held strands of golden honey, was now a stark platinum, growing twice in length. And her nails were sharp as daggers. But the final clue to her transformation was her fangs.

Though I knew what to expect after all my years of training, it still surprised me when she opened her mouth to scream out in pain, baring her fangs. They were thick ivory and perfectly pointed, showing from beneath her pink lips— weapons of mass destruction. That's why I'd handcuffed her, knowing it would happen eventually, but I'd been pushing it aside for as long as I could. But time was running out and the venom had taken over her body. She was mostly vampire now.

Her chest rose and fell with gentle breaths and her thick black lashes rested against her cheeks. I took in her features —delicate nose, curved cheekbones, small chin. I focused on her lips, full and red like a rosebud. Her eyebrows remained brown, dark when compared to her light hair and she was breathtaking; I couldn't help but notice her beauty. Any man would.

She curled her small fingers and twitched as though deep within a dream, the silver cuffs hanging from her wrists like jewelry. I wondered what was in that mind of hers, what she dreamed about. Was it her family, her old life, or this John guy she had spoken about before?

Jealousy over her boyfriend boiled my blood and I subdued the urge to laugh at my reaction, considering it to be crazy. She wasn't mine and she certainly didn't belong to anyone else. Hell, she wasn't even human and could kill me instantly, being the beautiful weapon that she was. And now only time would tell how ravenous she'd be when she woke.

But she had been so sweet and —strangely enough— funny, even through her transformation and I wondered if her demeanor would change, now that she was a vampire. I shook my head, deeming the thought unimportant. Once she awoke and I fed her, I would take her to the old vampire and let him deal with her. Then I'd be back to headquarters before anyone knew better.

Headquarters. Shit.

I slipped my cellphone from my pocket, mentally kicking myself for not thinking about it before. If they'd wanted to, FUSE could track me with my phone. I powered it off and put it back in my pocket before standing. They could still track me with it off, but I was hesitant to dispose of my cell just yet, not knowing when and if I'd need to call for backup. But I didn't expect my men to miss me for a couple days yet, knowing I still had time before they tracked me down.

I stretched out my arms and yawned. I'd hardly gotten any sleep for the last twenty-four hours. Once this was all over, I'd sleep like a baby, but for now I had some hunting to do. I needed to get Ruby some blood for when she awoke.

The evening air was still warm and dry from the recently set sun, a typical summer night in Arizona. The plants, few as they were, were a dull yellow-green. Cacti grew in hordes of every shape and size, and sticker trees clawed at the evening sky with their pointy fingers. I glanced back at the tall mission, now barely visible in the twilight, and figured I'd have a couple more hours before Ruby awoke.

I sat down on a flat rock and, pulling my blade from my pack, began to sharpen it. It had my last name, Stone, engraved on the side and nostalgia hit me hard as a bludgeon upon seeing it. Everything around me —the desert, the knife Lily had given me, the smell of summer— was a harsh reminder of what I'd lost long ago, the night she was taken from me. I felt myself being pulled into a memory, but I shook it off, unwilling to go down that path again. I had

become a product of my past, but I would not let it overwhelm me in that moment. I had bigger problems to worry about.

A sudden shift in the breeze interrupted my thoughts, causing the hairs on my neck to stand on end, and I instantly knew something was wrong. I froze, the blade of my knife still resting on the whetstone, daring not to move, holding my breath. I knew something was out there— maybe it was the way the air had become oddly still or because the crickets suddenly ceased their evening chirp. But either way, dread sank through me. The sky darkened and the brilliant orange glow over the mountains turned dull and grey. The first stars of night twinkled into existence.

The hoot of an owl pierced the silence, and that's when I knew for sure that someone or something was out there, the owl warning me of their presence.

Careful not to make a sound, I slowly placed the knife and whetstone on the ground and slid my gun from my pack, cocking it with a soft click. I wanted to turn on my flashlight, but didn't dare take the chance for it would be a dead giveaway of my location.

I stood cautiously, my movements slow and liquid. I held up my arms, elbows bent and gun at the ready. My heart thundered and pounded in my ears as I felt a sense of Déjà vu, like I'd been here before, had this same feeling. I knew why, but I wouldn't let the memory cross into my mind. I pushed it away, needing my mind clear in case of danger.

I must've held the same position for a long time, because my legs ached to move. I strained my eyes and ears, grasping for the slightest sound or movement, but the night was as still as death.

Again, the owl hooted and I shifted my legs, the sound of crunching beneath my boot giving me away. Without warning, I was slammed backwards, my body flying through the air like a trapeze act, except much less graceful I presumed. I almost lost grip on my gun, but fumbled with the cold metal, regaining my hold at the last possible second. I landed hard on the ground, the air knocked from my chest, and something flashed by me, a blur of darkness. I knew in an instant I was in the company of a very experienced vampire. But how, out here in the middle of nowhere? And why? I shot up to a fight-ready position.

I barely had time to let any more questions come to mind when I was struck again, my body taking air and twisting painfully before landing on the ground once more. I shook the dizziness from my brain, my heart hammering in my chest. The vampire was playing with me, trying to stun me. It's what they did before they fed, a game like cat and mouse. They liked to make sure their target was good and weak before they went in for the kill. It was just a matter of time before I was knocked senseless.

I frowned. The hell if I would let that happen.

Another blur sped by and I squeezed the trigger, the sound of the bullet echoing through the desert like a bottle rocket. I held my breath and waited…

Silence.

But before I had the chance to wonder if I'd gotten him, a fast breeze whooshed by me, indicating I hadn't. He was still alive and well, the asshole. I got to my knees and shifted my gaze back and forth, gun at the ready. I edged toward a large boulder and pressed my back into it. I would not let the bloodsucker sneak up on me from behind.

I listened, but heard nothing except my own breath and the pound of my heart like a drum beating inside me. I didn't understand why a vampire would've come out here all alone. They usually ran in packs and stuck to the sanctity of cities and alleyways where they could blend in, not in the middle of nowhere with nothing to feed upon except rabbits and quail. I inwardly laughed at myself. Of course, they had something to feed upon. Me. But that still didn't answer how this rogue vampire found his way to such an unpopulated area. Could he sense Ruby somehow? Fear crested in my chest.

A delicate breeze brushed across my skin. A distant howl of a coyote sounded out through the still night. There was no way this vampire was one of our own. He would've revealed himself to me if that were the case. Our supernatural associates were paid very well and they were under strict contract should they ever break the rules, they'd be given over to their own kind and executed as traitors.

I shook my head, thinking it didn't make sense. But regardless of the semantics, it was only him and me. If there had been more than one vampire, I wouldn't stand a chance. But he was alone and I was well trained. I might be able to pick him off if I remained careful.

I wrenched my neck to the side and cocked my ear, hearing a faint rustling in the bushes beside the rock I hid behind. I jumped and shot at the spot where the noise had come from, the aftershock reverberating through the air, my hands tingling from the effects. I was too slow— maybe from lack of sleep or the strain my body had been through— but the vamp forged ahead regardless, knocking me from my feet. This time he stayed with me, his sharp nails digging into the flesh on my arms. My gun flew from my hand as we sailed through the air, his onyx gaze locked on mine, fangs bared. We tumbled to the ground, rolling. I fumbling for the stake at my hip, but he knocked my hand away, keeping a tight hold on me. From the darkness of his eyes, I knew this vampire was old and strong.

He pinned me to the ground and hovered over me, saying nothing. His breath smelled of death and stale blood as his mouth drew in closer and closer to my neck. But I smiled and, after a moment, spit in his face.

He reared back in shock, eyebrows raised, and I took advantage of the distraction by freeing one arm and punching right through his jawbone. I knew it wouldn't knock him out, but it would buy me a few seconds. He hissed and fell to the side as I plucked the stake from my belt and jammed it hard into his chest. His eyes went wide, his mouth opened in a silent scream. I scrambled to my feet, searching for my gun in the pale moonlight. But I froze

when the vampire let out a howling laugh, a sound so wretched I cringed. He wasn't dead.

Panic struck me as his gaze descended to the stake in his chest. He gripped it and pulled it out, dripping with blood. I'd missed. How the hell did I miss?

I didn't even have time to think before he attacked me again, this time his fangs sinking deep into my neck. I struggled with all of my strength but my efforts were futile. He drained the blood from me with immense speed and I began to grow weak. My vision blurred.

I thought of Ruby, my Faith, and I worried about her. She was too young and inexperienced to be left alone and if this vamp found her, he would more than likely kill her. She would be seen as a threat to this rogue devil, not a welcomed partner. *Faith*. I was supposed to protect her and see her to safety. *Faith*. She was all alone. *Faith*…

ELEVEN: RUBY

I woke with a gasp, my body flying forward, my eyes widening in the darkness.

It was done, I could feel it. And there was no more pain.

I was reborn in the same body, but different. It was definitely not the one I'd had for the past eighteen years, that's for dang sure. This body was denser, but lighter. Stronger, yet nimble. My bones felt like titanium. My muscles like solid rock, yet pliable.

I was aware of every hair on my flesh, every shred of air whispering past me in the draft. And my eyes… I could feel my irises narrowing, catlike and sharp, soaking in every particle of light, defining every shape, carving every line and color out of the objects in the room. Only a single candle lit the dark windowless room, yet I could see as well as if it were daylight.

I breathed in, my lungs burning with their new, expanded capacity. I tried to stretch my arms out to my sides, the soreness of what would be compared to the after-burn of a triathlon singeing through me, but the handcuffs held my wrists tightly together and I growled in frustration.

I froze, being momentarily distracted from my restraints by a strange sound, my hearing so intensified that I wasn't sure exactly what I was listening to. At first, I thought I heard thunder, the low booming roll that would ripple across the desert before a monsoon struck. But I focused on the noise, surprised when realizing it was the sound of the old church settling around me. I could hear every creak and crack, every strain and rumble, as if the old building were alive and breathing.

I cuffed my ears with my hands, trying to subdue all of the activity, but the strain from the handcuffs chafed my wrists. All of the sights and sounds and sensations and smells overstimulated my brain and I could barely differentiate one from the other, much less where they came from.

There were so many things, so many little things that captured my attention —the smell of the church, lending its long history to me with just one inhalation, the artificial light, as though it came from my own eyes, and the webbed cracks in the wall, creating a pattern all their own. It was beautiful, like art work.

Even the dust motes that hung in the air held their own beauty. I reached up to touch one, and it bounced off my fingertip, light as a feather. I could feel

an electric charge in the air, a humming resonance of energy flowing through me and I knew I was connected to everything. It was fascinating.

But through all of the chaotic buzz, something was missing, *Guy*.

I reached for the doorknob and, in trying to open it, ripped it off plain and simple. Obviously unaware of my own strength, I stared in amazement at the wooden bulb in my hand as the door swung open, revealing the candle-lit Catholic Sanctuary. My mind quickly changed focus and I dropped the knob to the floor, stepping into the church, Mother Mary laying her sad eyes upon me once again. I could swear the painted tears on her cheeks were real, wet and liquid, and they rolled down her face as she mourned for my soul. Gooseflesh pebbled my skin and I couldn't help but think I'd stepped into a whole new world— a world of pure astonishing bliss and unadulterated pain, the pain something that I categorized as loneliness. And I could already tell that my loneliness would be a close companion in my newly changed body and my newly birthed life.

But aside from my theological musings, I could feel that something was wrong. Very freaking wrong. And it wasn't because I was no longer human —that in itself, in fact, felt very right for some reason. No, it was something entirely different, and I shuddered as fingers of terror gripped my heart.

Faith…

My ears perked up and I could've sworn I heard Guy's voice. I went to take my first step out into the church, but in trying out my new legs, my body bolted forward as if I had a jet pack strapped to my back. In a blazing flash of light and speed, I rushed past the pulpit, the statues, the pews, and burst out the door of the mission in a shower of broken wood and splinters. As the pieces rained down on me I froze in awe of my speed and strength, wondering if Superman had felt like this the first time he flew.

"What the…" I looked back behind me to see I'd torn the solid door from its metal hinges, the thing shattered into a thousand pieces. I barely had time to realize what I'd done, when my attention was diverted elsewhere. I needed to find Guy.

My eyes adjusted to the same scenery I'd seen the night before, a beautiful desert vista with the large mountains lying along the horizon like a giant sleeping lion. The moon was just rising above those mountains and the first stars of night shone so clearly they seemed to be resting on my shoulders, hanging on the air like clusters of frozen diamonds. But despite my new psychedelic vision, there was no Guy.

Panicked, I spun my head back and forth and, like a knock to the head, the scent of him planted itself in my brain —wet leather, fresh musk, and live blood. My sense of smell came automatically and I didn't even have to tell myself to breathe in.

I flew through the desert, fear jamming itself into my heart and in mere seconds, I found myself at a dead stop directly in front of Guy. He was lying on the ground with a dark-haired man —wait, no, not a man, a *vampire*—

sucking the blood from his neck. The vampire was wounded as well and it was obvious Guy had put up a tremendous fight.

I suddenly saw red, rage coursing through my veins. Without hesitation, and before my brain even had time to react, I grabbed the vampire by his shoulders and threw him off of Guy. He flew into the air into a triple twist, before landing on the ground and breaking through the top crust with a loud boom.

Guy's bleary eyes landed on me in surprise and then traveled to my wrists. It was then that we both realized I no longer wore my handcuffs. I looked at the ground beneath me, tiny pieces of broken metal and chain lay strewn across the dirt. Confusion and panic fought inside of me and in the span of a heartbeat, I was kneeling next to Guy.

"Are you ok?" I asked, my own voice like a string quartet warming up before a symphony. It sounded strange, fluidic, and distant, as though it was not my own.

"Yeah." He choked and sputtered and I knew he was lying. The bite wound on his neck trickled blood and he was pale as a sheet, lacking any shred of energy. His eyes took me in before fluttering closed and I grabbed his shoulders as if it would keep him conscious. I sensed fear in him; even smelled it like a predator would smell its prey. Not only was he afraid of the vampire that had gotten to him, but he was afraid of me. I didn't know how a new vampire was supposed to feel, or if vampires even had human feelings, but at that exact minute, my heart hurt. It hurt that Guy feared me. I could smell him more intensely now, his musky leather and his red-hot blood fresh in his veins. But I did not want to drink his blood, for some reason and the thought befuddled me. That was the whole point wasn't it? Vampires kinda had a thing for human blood.

"Behind you…" Guy rasped, his eyes now cracked open. My body elevated from the ground and, as if in slow motion, I twisted in the air to meet the other vampire. His eyes glared at me, intense and angry, and he came after me like a flying maniac. I looked down at the ground and marveled at the distance between me and the rocks below. Crap. Either I was flying, or I'd just jumped very high and time was moving in slow motion. Either way, I was about to have it out with this nasty vampire, and by the flames of hatred in my heart, he wasn't going to have it very easy.

I focused on the vein in his neck. It pulsed with cold blood, and smelled like… like banana pudding? In any case, he looked awfully angry and ugly to boot, but smelled like the most delicious food I'd ever tasted.

Even before we landed on the ground, my fangs descended and sank into his neck, sucking the sweet dead nectar from his body. When he tried to resist, pushing against me with his steely arms, I took his head and snapped it to the left, his neck bones cracking in my hands. I gasped when his skin broke open, the remainder of his blood exploding in my mouth. I was drenched, my bloody hair dripping onto my satin gown. I hadn't realized how hungry I'd

been until I was lapping up every drop of the sticky syrup.

Once I'd drained him, I tossed his corpse aside like a bag of garbage, disgusted. I fell to the ground, heaving and overwhelmed by the sensation of being fulfilled. I felt alive, more so than I ever had when I was human, stronger. I looked over at my savior, his chest rising and falling slowly, and his hands lying limp at his sides. His eyes closed and I could tell he was fading fast. No!

I snapped to his side and checked the bite wound on his neck, but there was no more blood oozing out. He peeled open his eyes, but they shut again as if it were too much effort to keep them open. He was dying. I knew it.

"Oh, my God." Hyperventilating, I ran my hands over his cold arm, knowing I had to do something fast. My heart pounded and my mind spun, trying to find a solution. An owl hooted in the night as though everything was normal but this was the farthest thing from it.

I brought my fingers up to my sharp fangs and gingerly touched them, having trouble believing Guy had saved my life, knowing what I would eventually turn into. And now he lay there before me vulnerable; I could kill him so easily. But… I didn't want to.

I gazed down at him and recalled movies I'd seen and books I'd read about vampires. Supposedly, drinking the blood of a vampire could rapidly heal wounds and replenish one's strength. The consideration that these mere books and movies could hold true was insane, much less the belief I was a vampire, in itself. But I didn't have time for a deep, reflective inner moment. I had to do something quickly.

Like a bolt of lightning, something clicked inside of me, an instinct of some sort and I tore into my wrist with my fangs. I stuck my flesh to Guy's mouth, hoping I was right, hoping my blood would save his life.

TWELVE: GUY

I vaguely remembered the vampire sinking his teeth into my neck and how the world grew hazy. I vaguely remembered him hissing when being pulled from my body. I vaguely remembered warning Ruby to look behind her. And I vaguely remembered a thick, metallic liquid traveling down my throat, choking me, but I swallowed regardless.

And then she was kneeling over me like a macabre vision, beautiful and vicious, and my numb body prickled with feeling, my heart palpitating and pumping. My cold blood traveled warm again and my lungs gasped from the large intake of air. My vision cleared, showing her violet eyes, her white-blonde hair curling over her shoulders, and the anxious expression on her face. She looked at her wrist and observed the wound closing, amazed by her own body's reaction. It was clear then that she'd fed me her blood and saved my life, as I had saved hers.

Ruby was no longer restrained by the handcuffs, though her left wrist still held the metal bracelet and the chain that dangled below. The rest of the broken pieces lay strewn about the ground, and I had a moment of panic at her freedom. Yet for some odd reason, my fear subsided quickly and I knew she wouldn't hurt me. But the idea was crazy, for she was a vampire —a damned strong vampire if my guess was right— and could do considerable damage, though young as she was. Still though, most Newborns were weak and she shouldn't have been able to bust through the silver cuffs, much less kill the older vampire as she had.

The way she looked at me was not predatory nor malicious like it should've been, but on the contrary, kind and caring. She looked worried and I shook my head, trying to wrap my mind around the strange events of the night, thinking this was no ordinary vampire.

My strength slowly returning, I sat up and searched her face with wonder. "You… saved my life." Her eyes lifted to mine. Her hair dripped with blood and the red liquid ran down her white gown. She fidgeted with the lace hem and cast her gaze to the ground.

"It was nothing."

I shook my head, confusion marring my thoughts. If I hadn't witnessed it first hand, this docile Newborn vampire sitting before me, I'd never have believed it. If it had been any other vampire that broke through those cuffs,

and in my weakened state, I'd have been long since dead. My mind was on overdrive with questions I couldn't answer.

Though my fear of her had dissipated, I was still wary and retrieved my wooden stake from the ground, holding it in my lap. Her sad eyes followed my movements as if she knew I didn't trust her and I couldn't help but think it such a human reaction. It wasn't normal.

I nodded to the heap of bloody flesh lying on the ground. There were only bits and pieces left. "It wasn't 'nothing.' You could've tried to kill me like he did." I tilted my head in question. "Why did you do it?"

One long moment of silence passed, as though she were searching for the answer herself. "I'm not sure. It was just… like an instinct. Like I wasn't in charge of my body." She shrugged. "I guess it was because you'd saved *my* life and I owed you one."

I laughed nervously. Though Newborn vampires were weak at first, that didn't mean they weren't ravenous, voracious at best. They would awake in their new life, wild with hunger, blinded by it, and anything in their way was taken down, violently. But Ruby… she just sat there calm and… compassionate. My mind was blown.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"For what?" I found myself asking from within my stupor and glanced over to see Ruby intensely studying me. Her eyes traveled my body and I scrunched my brows, wondering what could possibly be on her mind.

"Did I make you a vampire by feeding you my blood?" she finally asked, and I subdued the urge to laugh, shaking my head.

"That's an old wives' tale. The only way for a vampire to turn someone is by biting them and injecting their venom into the human's blood stream. It's a conscious decision, not something that just happens automatically."

Ruby's face visibly relaxed for a moment, but then it tightened with dread again. She glanced at me with fear in her eyes and, knowing what she was thinking, I spoke before she could utter another word.

"And no, the other vampire did not infect me. I was just his midnight snack."

She released a half-hearted laugh, but her gaze drifted to the ground as though she were being pulled into another thought. "I can't believe I killed him," she said, her nose wrinkling with worry. "I've never killed anyone before. What's going to happen to me? Am I going to be in trouble?"

Oh jeez. Not only was she a caring vampire, but a remorseful one too. This was getting stranger by the moment. My jaw clenched when I found myself feeling —what was it— sympathy? Ha. Sympathy for a vampire. Sure.

"Listen," I said, stumbling to my feet, brushing the stickers off my pants. "I work for FUSE, and as far as I'm concerned, you've done us a favor. He was nothing but a low-life bloodsucker anyway."

Her lip trembled and I realized what I'd said. She was one of them now and I had just backhanded her with insult. But I shouldn't be caring that I'd

hurt a vampire's feelings. Again, I shook my head at the absurdity of it all and sighed, flabbergasted.

"Is that what the symbol's for?" Her voice snapped me back to reality and she was pointing up to my shirt. I looked down to the patch I wore. "Is that for FUSE?" she asked.

I exhaled, running my fingers through my hair in frustration. I'd already divulged too much information to this girl, er, vampire. But that was when I thought I'd be done and over with this quickly. That was before I realized how much time I'd actually have to spend with her. That was when she was still a human. But it wasn't the case anymore, she wasn't human. She was now a full-fledged vampire, my enemy.

"Yes," I answered. From now on, short answers would be the best. I shouldn't be conversing with a vampire. We needed to get a move on and time was running short.

"It looks like a funny cross," she mused, cocking her head.

I knelt down and ran my hands over the dirt, finding my pack. I retrieved my flashlight and clicked it on, shining the light over the ground, searching for my gun. "It's an Ankh."

"Oh." Her face wrenched with an emotion I couldn't place. I couldn't begin to understand what she was going through. Heck, I wasn't sure I *wanted* to understand what she was going through. She was the enemy after all, and I was finding myself getting a little too gushy over this vampire, not to mention that I'd done a terrible deed in betraying my men, my loyalty to FUSE. I kept my voice steady, trying to get a move on. "The Ankh was originally used in ancient Egypt. It's the symbol for life."

She studied the patch on my chest. It was like she said, a red-stunted cross with a loop at the top. I'd worn it so long I hardly noticed it anymore, but she noticed it and seemed consumed by it, her expression turning dark. Her eyes flashed with something I was familiar with, the same look most Newborns had once after turning; pure rage.

"The symbol for life," she repeated, her voice as cold as ice. Her clawed fingers curled into the dirt at her sides. "As opposed to what? *Un*-life?"

I became uneasy with her tone, though somehow comforted. Maybe she was a normal vampire after all and it had just taken a few moments for her primal instincts to kick in. I searched for my weapon, knowing I might need it if she grew more unpredictable. The spot from my flashlight landed on my gun and I sighed with relief, placing it back into my holster.

She growled when I didn't reply. I kept my hand on my gun.

"Am I right?" she asked. "FUSE symbolizes life? And what am I, death? Some unholy beast that roams the night, feeding on innocent people?" Her fangs ascended and before I could blink, she stood mere inches from me, so fast I hadn't seen her move. By the looks of her, she was enraged, her expression fuming, and I held my stance, cautious. In my opinion, it was a normal reaction from someone who'd just realized they would forever be a

vampire.

"Tell me!" Her screaming words nearly caused me to flinch but I held strong and our eyes met in an uneasy connection. I would not look away first. It was the first rule in training: Never show your weakness to an Unfortunate — even if the Unfortunate was the most beautiful girl you'd ever seen.

"You are very much alive." I spoke cautiously as though handling a faulty time bomb. "But not in the traditional sense."

She stared at me intensely, her violet eyes flashing with anger. "Who the hell did this to me anyway?" Her fists clenched to her sides, her nails digging into her palms, drawing blood.

"I don't know." My answer wasn't what she wanted, but it was honest.

"Because when I find out who it was that made me this way, I'm going to kill them." Her chest heaved, her jaw clenched. She was on the verge of a meltdown.

I held up a flexed palm, my calm voice belying my apprehension.

"Your maker is already dead, Faith. Killed in the ambush. You need to relax. Calm down. There's no need to get yourself wound up."

"Wound up…" She spiked her eyebrows, her voice breaking, making me think she was about to lose it. "Do you understand that I died, or was supposed to die? And I'd finally come to terms with that? I was on my way to heaven…or hell…or wherever it is you go. But that son of a bitch stole my way out. He stole my peace. It was my death— *mine!* And he stole it."

I could see the situation hitting her all at once. She was a volcano of emotions, erupting uncontrollably. She stomped her foot into the dirt like a ridiculous child, the ground breaking beneath her heel, leaving her leg in a small hole. She looked down in shock at the crevice she'd made as though she'd never seen such a thing before—and I guessed she probably hadn't.

A gust of wind blasted through the desert and a small tumbleweed brushed by Ruby's legs, but she was unaware, stewing in grim realization. And then after a few moments, her body softened, her eyes pooling with unshed tears.

"What have I become?" she breathed, her gaze lighting on mine as though I had all of the answers. I didn't. I knew nothing other than how to kill vampires and werewolves. But still, she pleaded with her eyes.

And God, there it was again, that deep aching sympathy I felt for her. It leaked through my body like an illness. Damn it, why was she making me feel this way? I released the grip on my gun, hanging my arms at my sides, pondering over the fact that she hadn't exploded like I'd expected. She hadn't lunged at me or attacked me, nor shown any signs of threat to me as a normal Newborn vampire would. Instead, she caved inwards, her body slumping forward in sadness. She fell to her knees and sobbed.

"Why did this happen to me? I didn't want this. This wasn't my choice." Tears flooded her cheeks like Niagara Falls during a heavy rain storm.

I struggled to find a single word that could soothe her broken heart, but

found myself coming up short. The need to comfort her overwhelmed me and I found myself stepping forward.

"You're right." My voice sounded hollow, distant. "You did not choose this."

She didn't look up at me, but I knew she was listening. I found myself battling with my conscience, thinking I should just take her to the old vampire and get this whole thing over with. But the overwhelming need to be there for her consumed me. I didn't like it and didn't understand it, but there it was. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding and knelt down beside her.

"You were taken advantage of and turned against your will. It isn't fair. Life isn't fair. But what are you going to do about it? Are you going to let your anger tear the world apart? Or are you going to take what has been dealt to you and accept it, control it, and use it to your advantage?"

Her shoulders trembled and the breeze took strands of her hair and lifted them from her face. Her anger fled, leaving in its place sadness. I inched in closer.

"This could be a blessing, Faith." The words left my mouth before I'd even realized and I found myself laying a hand on her shoulder. I was done questioning myself, done fighting between the rights and the wrongs, done worrying about what I'd done. There was no going back now. "This could be your path to right every wrong. Listen, I know a lot about vampires, but I don't know it all. This could be your redemption."

Her body softened and she leaned into me, her head resting against my chest. My body tensed at her closeness. She was like a frightened animal, one I did not want to scare away. God knows why, but she trusted me— she shouldn't, but damn it if she did. She nestled further into my shirt, her body cool like a vampire's should be, and I had the sudden urge to wrap my arms around her, to warm her cold skin. But I didn't.

"What would you do?" she whispered, her words floating off into the breeze.

Her question hit me hard and I tried to imagine what it would be like in her shoes. What it would be like if one day I woke up and found myself eternally trapped in the body of an Unfortunate Soul with my entire life gone. Everything I'd worked for, vanished into thin air. But then I realized my life *was* forever changed, because of her. I would never be the same after the decision I'd made to save her. Ruby and I were not all that different.

But I was still left with her question. What would I do?

"I don't know," I replied honestly. She looked up into my face, my heart clenching in response. "The question is what do *you* want to do?"

She considered my words, letting herself fall silent. A patch of clouds drifted over the moon, casting her profile into darkness.

"I want to be happy," she said. "But most of all, I don't want to be alone anymore. I feel so alone."

My muscles went lax, my heart squeezing inside of my chest. I sighed,

reaching into my pocket to pull out a key. I took her arm and carefully unlocked the remaining silver cuff, letting it slide from her wrist and fall to the ground. Her eyes found mine and I tried on an encouraging smile.

"You aren't alone. And believe me, Faith, once we get this all worked out and find you a place to call home, you'll never be alone again."

THIRTEEN: RUBY

The earlier events of the night occupied my mind like elderly people at a Friday night fish fry. I could hardly believe I'd killed that vampire, and something like guilt washed through me over the notion. But Guy's life had been in danger and I'd had no other choice.

I also recalled the rage that'd boiled my veins, causing me to melt down like a tempered child in front of Guy, and how he'd stayed calm and brought me down from my fury. A heated blush feathered my cheeks as I thought back on the embarrassing moment. It was as if my vampire self was fighting to claim my body and mind, and I wasn't ready to let go yet.

But as soon as we left the mission that night, his temporary warmth fled. The comfort he'd given me melted, leaving behind the hardheaded man I'd first met. Back in war-mode, his movements were sharp and cautious, like we'd be caught any minute.

We hustled our way on foot toward the city and stopped in front of a lone drug store on an empty stretch of freeway. I zipped in through the door with lightning speed and shot into the bathroom to wait for Guy, as he'd instructed. It wouldn't be in our best interest if someone saw me in my white altar boy robe, looking like a bloody vampire bride. I went to shut the door softly behind me, but it slammed under the command of my hand and I nearly jumped a mile. My newfound strength was constantly jarring. I went to the mirror and looked up, sucking in a startled breath at the sight that greeted me.

The first thing I noticed were my eyes; where they had once been a soft brown, they were now so light they looked purple, my violet irises a bright ring around the black.

And my skin… it had been fair and freckled before, but was now white as cream and smooth as silk, flawless— except for the dried blood from killing that nasty vampire, of course. I touched my cheek and there, brushing the back of my hand, was my hair. It had been dishwater blonde in life, but was now so pale —aside from the golden sheen— it could've been mistaken for pure white. My long mane hung in waving curls around my shoulders, much longer than it had been only forty-eight hours ago.

I turned on the water, unable to take my eyes off my reflection. In life, I'd never considered myself very attractive and in all honesty, I had been downright plain to look at. Nothing special, nothing stood out about me. But

now, I could see the beauty there, every feature accentuated under the newness of my vampire façade.

My eyelashes were longer and darker, my lips a cherry red, and my cheekbones even seemed sharper. I splashed water onto my face, cleaning off the blood, hoping to clean away my guilt and shame as well. A soft knock sounded at the door and I went to open it, but in my effort, ripped the silver handle off in my hand. Crap. I grimaced, remembering doing the same thing at the mission, and made a mental note to be careful of knobs from now on.

The door creaked open of its own accord, revealing Guy's astonished expression at seeing me with the knob in hand, an empty hole in the door where it should be. I shrugged and Guy sighed, rolling his eyes as if to say, "What am I going to do with you?"

He grabbed the handle from me and, in exchange, gave me a bundle of clothes. He fixed the knob back into place, and before closing the door, shot me a dubious, sideways glance. I laughed at the expression on his face and, what's more, the absurdity of my situation.

Here I stood in a drug store bathroom —a vicious freaking vampire— slipping into an oversized Arizona T-shirt, black stretch pants, and flip flops with sunglass-wearing lizards on the soles. I looked ridiculous, but I inhaled a deep breath, deeming my touristy wardrobe would have to do for now.

This time when I opened the door, I made a conscious effort to do so gingerly. Guy waited outside, leaning up against the wall and, despite his dashing good looks that made me weak in the knees, he appeared sullen and tired. Dark circles crested his under-eyes and his cheeks looked hollow.

"Have you eaten?" I asked, joining him.

"I'm fine." He latched onto my arm and abrasively guided me through the store as though on a mission.

"You're not fine." I frowned at him. "I can tell. You need to eat."

Guy flashed me a look that only a man like him could— headstrong and stubborn. "I've got more important things to worry about. I can eat once I get you someplace safe."

"No." I ripped my arm from his grasp and he stopped, shock taking over his expression. "You can't help me if you aren't well." I headed to the refrigerated section to grab him some food, Guy tight on my heels. My flip-flops clapped across the tile floor and I laid my hand on the glass door's handle, but he stopped me with a firm grasp.

"Wait," he growled and I turned to look at him in surprise. His lips curled into a smile and his grip on my arm loosened. "Gentle, this time."

I blushed as his fingers trailed down my arm, causing a warmth to pool in my belly. Flustered, I turned my attention to the premade sandwiches, pretending I was more interested in processed meat than Guy's smile. I carefully creaked open the glass door. "Are you a ham or turkey kind of guy?"

He shook his head at my obstinacy and I could tell he was trying not to roll his eyes. He chuckled. "Turkey."

The cashier rang up our purchases and I glanced out the glass storefront, noticing a group of men approaching. Soldiers. My heart hammered as I spotted the same patch on their shoulders as the one Guy wore. Double Crap, FUSE. My body stiffened and I shuffled my feet, causing Guy to glance over and follow my eyes to the group outside. His jaw clenched at the sight of them.

The cashier handed him his change and a bag. He leaned into me. "Just act normal."

Normal? I held back a nervous laugh. A vampire who could barely control her own body, not to mention had just killed someone, acting normal in front of her arch enemies? Piece of cake.

I followed Guy toward the exit, but the soldiers met us there as they entered the store. They stopped when they saw him and made some sort of salute, three fingers frozen to their left shoulders. A tall, lanky soldier addressed him.

"Captain Stone."

Guy nodded. "At ease." The sharp tone of his voice made me want to drop to the ground and give him twenty pushups. At his words, the men dropped their arms to their sides.

Guy had told me before that he was a captain, but the information didn't ease my shock at seeing him in his natural position of leadership. For one so young, he adopted the command of an older man in front of the soldiers, freezing them with his presence.

He took my arm, but before we could make our escape, the tall man spoke again. "Were you at the …" his eyes shifted to me warily, "the *gathering* the other night?"

Guy turned to me, his voice low and raw. "Will you excuse us for a moment?"

It took a moment for me to realize they wanted privacy, away from me. "Oh, yes. Of course." I awkwardly strolled to the greeting cards and pretended to flip through them.

"Were you at the stakeout at the old warehouse last night?" the soldier continued his question, thinking I was too far away to hear. Little did he know I had super-sonic vampire hearing and I studied them both from the corner of my eye.

"We heard it was a bloodbath," another soldier added, as though passing on a scandalous secret. "Thirty some-odd vamps and four witches, all blown to smithereens."

A dreadful heat rushed through me at his words, my fingers and toes burning with unease. I didn't want to go back to that night, to remember the torture I'd gone through. And I didn't even want to think about all the others who had suffered as well.

The tall soldier shifted his gaze to me, his eyes taking me in from head to toe and landing on my butt, before he chuckled. "They said the unholy

bastards squealed like dying pigs when they caught fire."

Maybe it was fear or anger urging my body to react, but either way my vampire senses climbed my body like an elevator in a thirty story building. I could smell the soldiers' blood coursing through their veins and I caught a glimpse of the big purple vein throbbing in the tall man's neck. He smelled terrible. I clenched my fists as if it would help me stay calm but the jerk continued on, his voice slimy, exactly like his personality.

"It's too bad the fangers explode or I'd have at least a dozen mounted on my wall as we speak."

And like a crimson veil being placed before my eyes, I saw red. It's not like I had an attachment to my kind or anything, seeing as I'd only been a vampire for twenty-four hours, but the way the man spoke enraged me and I wanted to hurt him, kill him. A hiss sizzled from my mouth and before I knew what I was doing, I rushed him, my body acting of its own accord.

Only steps away from the jerk, my fangs extended in my mouth, ready to rip into his soft flesh. But I was stopped mid-run by Guy's fast reflexes and to my surprise, he dipped me backwards in a provocative embrace, his lips crushing against mine, hiding away my fangs. Shocked, my breath caught in my chest and my fury melted away like a warm snow cone on hot pavement. The touch of his mouth on mine sent shivers through my body. Every hair follicle on my flesh stood out and my skin pebbled with the intensity of the kiss. My fangs retracted when his tongue slipped into my mouth, warm pleasure coursing through me. He had taken me breathless right there in front of the gaping soldiers and I wasn't sure how to feel about it.

"Go Captain!" The men cheered and prodded him on.

His mouth parted from mine, leaving me panting and my lips swollen and tingling. He whispered in my ear. "Stay calm and keep your mouth closed, unless you want us both to die before leaving this store." He brought me back up to standing and turned to the ogling men.

"We're leaving," he said, the tone of his voice sharp and commanding. The soldiers saluted again and he whipped me around them and out the door. The cool night air blasted me in the face, soothing my flushed skin, and it was then that I started to realize just how much I'd screwed up. And Guy certainly looked peeved over me nearly blowing our cover. Unable to ignore the urge to lighten the mood, I turned to him and smiled sweetly.

"You know Captain Stone, I don't usually kiss on the first date."

Guy froze, his ears turning red, and for a moment I thought he might implode with anger, embarrassment, or a combination of the two. But instead, he slid me a glare and grunted. He yanked me off the concrete onto the dirt ground and headed out into the desolate landscape.

Yeah, so much for a romantic first kiss.

"That is why you need to do what I say." Guy shook the sandwich bag in front of me, his brows drawn together in a flat line. "That was too close."

Ashamed of my impulsive reaction to the nasty soldier, I blushed with

embarrassment. And then I blushed even more when realizing that vampires actually *can* blush and Guy could probably see the stain on my cheeks. But I couldn't help my shame. What had just happened with me in the drug store wasn't much different from my tantrum at the mission, an uncontrollable ferocious side of me rearing its ugly head.

And I figured the only reason Guy had kissed me was to hide my fangs. But I touched my swollen lips, wondering if there was more to it. I couldn't ignore the warm pleasure still coursing through me from his kiss and part of me wondered if maybe he felt the same. Whether he did or not, he was highly on edge, his shoulders tense under the dim light of the moon. I shook my head as if trying to shake off the lust I had for him, but it didn't help much.

We continued hiking through the desert with nothing to guide us other than the light of the rising moon. I watched as little creatures dodged in and out of hiding as we went, something I knew Guy couldn't see.

"Why can't we take a car again?" I asked.

"There will be many check points because of last night's battle. We can't chance it. Not yet."

The sound of shrill cricket chirps pierced my ears but I was growing more used to my intensified hearing. I glanced to my side, watching Guy's muscles move beneath his clothes while he walked. Yet again blushing, I quickly lifted my eyes to his face.

"Where are we going?"

"There's a blood bank not far from here. You will need to feed before long."

My attraction to Guy was momentarily forgotten when my stomach twisted at his words. The idea of drinking blood immediately gave me the urge to dry heave. But I could not ignore the hunger growing inside of me. Guy was right; I would eventually have to feed. We crossed through an old, dried-up riverbed, a washed-up car sitting there, abandoned. Guy pulled out a flashlight and peered inside. He shook his head before trudging on.

I wondered about him and how he felt about our predicament, how he felt about me. The fear I'd sensed on him before wasn't there anymore. And seeing as the silver handcuffs hadn't worked on me before, he hadn't taken any precautions to keep me from flat-out attacking him. I knew I would never hurt him, but did he know that? We swerved around a cluster of barrel cactus.

"Why aren't you afraid of me anymore?" I wondered aloud.

His jaw twitched in response like he wondered if I was reading his mind, but his surprised expression fled in the matter of a millisecond, returning to its normal, hard stoicism. "If you were going to kill me, you'd already have done it by now."

I dropped my head at his cold response, thinking that maybe his recent comfortability in me had something more to do with the fact I hadn't killed him yet, but apparently it did not. I kept my eyes on the rocky terrain ahead of us and, after a few moments, sensed Guy's eyes on me. He released a heavy

sigh and spoke barely above a whisper.

"Plus… you saved my life." I smiled, knowing it was hard for him to admit a vampire had saved his life— a teenaged-girl vampire at that.

"What?" I asked, as though I hadn't heard him. Anticipating the rise I'd get out of him, I leaned in closer. "What did you say? I didn't hear you."

He shot me an irritated glance, knowing very well that I'd heard him. "You saved my life," he mumbled again, but this time a little clearer. He exhaled loudly, raking his fingers through his dark hair. "I never thought I'd hear myself say this about a vampire, but I feel like I can trust you. It sounds crazy, I know."

I smiled, thinking maybe Captain Impossible was finally coming out of his shell after all. I gave him a quick glance as we strode down the wash and around a wide mesquite tree. "It's not crazy. And you *can* trust me. Plus, you don't even smell good to me." He shot me a sharp look.

I giggled, backpedaling. "I mean, you smell wonderful. Really, you do. Just… not like dinner."

He snorted. But it was true. The smell of him was irresistible in the way a man smells to a woman; a musky, leather-laden roughness, that made my stomach flutter and my legs grow soft. But he didn't smell like that other vampire smelled last night, mouth-watering and sustaining. Out of nowhere, Guy laughed out loud as if from a private joke.

"What?" I asked, now grinning from ear to ear.

"Nothing." He shook his head and placed his hand on my back to guide me beneath a low-hanging branch. His palm slid to the curve of my lower back and my skin tingled at his touch.

"No, what is it?" I asked, wondering what he found so funny. I kept my eyes on the ground, trying to hide the flutter of desire I felt for him.

Guy adjusted the pack on his back. "It's… you are something else, Faith. You are different from the others."

I creased my brows, wondering if that was a compliment or just an observation. Either way, it warmed me, my skin pleasantly buzzing from his closeness. I knew if only for a moment, my soft-centered soldier was back, and I held back the impulse to slide my hand into his, wanting to entwine our fingers together. I instantly thought about the impromptu kiss he'd given me in the store and, whether or not it'd been just for show, warmth spread through my body as if it were happening all over again. I released a breath through pursed lips trying to blow away my sizzling thoughts.

We hiked for what seemed all night, and I was surprised at Guy's hard-as-nails endurance. He was the epitome of rugged manliness, and if I hadn't been a vampire with extended strength, I'd have found it hard to keep up.

Before long, we came to a large, sterile-looking facility enclosed in a tall, chain link fence with barbed wire curling around the top. We stopped at the padlocked gate and Guy dropped his pack and weapons to the ground. He looked at me, his slate-grey eyes flashing in the moonlight.

"Remember when you broke through your handcuffs and how you broke through the mission door?"

I nodded, wondering how I could forget.

"I need you to do that right now." He looked at the fence in front of us.

I also inspected the chain wrapping itself around the entrance like a steel snake. It had a padlock the size of a baseball holding the two gates together.

"Okay…" I said hesitantly. Yes I had proven powerful, but was I able to focus that power when I wanted? I wasn't sure.

Regardless of my doubt, I grasped the chain on either side of the lock and pulled. I could feel the tension within it, the little mechanisms straining, yet it would not give way. I pulled even harder but could not break it. I dropped my arms in frustration and released an exasperated sigh.

"I can't do it."

"Yes, you can." Guy closed the gap between us and laid a hand on my shoulder. My breath hitched at his touch and he leaned in close. "Let me ask you a question. What did you feel like when you killed that vampire last night?"

I looked into his stormy eyes and saw my own reflection there. I hardly recognized myself anymore; light-as-snow hair and violet eyes. But my focus shifted back to Guy, my own silhouette fading away. "I… I was afraid. And angry."

"Good." Guy's lips peeled into a grin. "And that allowed you to easily bust through your handcuffs, right?"

"I guess so."

"Apparently, emotion is what drives you." He tapped the lock with his finger. "Focus that emotion right here."

Guy stepped back and I took a deep breath, placing my hands where they were before. I let every emotion come to me from the past few weeks— fear, anger, guilt, love, hate, and above all, revenge. Once tapping into them, those powerful feelings coursed through me at lightning speed and with the fire of a thousand suns.

And before I knew it, the two gates burst open in a flash, pieces of metal and chain link raining down to the ground. I gasped, looking back at Guy for his approval and, to my pleasure, he nodded and smiled.

"Now let's get in and get out." He reached for me and I was struck by the gentle way he took my hand instead of wrenching my arm, as he tended to do. Warm pleasure traveled from our point of contact all the way through my body.

After a wink that said he liked me more than he was letting on, Guy urged me through the gates and up to the building's doors. He slipped a slim card into the crevice, jiggling and shaking the door. The door popped open with ease and we both grinned with relief.

"Well, that was easy." I stepped into the facility, Guy close behind.

"I'm surprised there's no alarm," he mused, scanning the place. "It's so

quiet."

Suddenly, a loud horn belted through the building as if mocking our stupidity.

"Or *not*." Panic zapped through me at the incessant alert signal.

"Shit." Guy's jaw clenched. "This way."

We bolted through another set of doors and sailed down a long, cold hallway, Guy flinging doors open left and right, peeking his head inside.

"Here." He surged through the last one on the left and I followed close behind. A large metal refrigerator took up the entire wall and, when Guy flung it open, it held bags of preserved blood. He grabbed a padded cooler sitting nearby and stuffed a handful of bags inside.

Once it was full, we burst through the door into the hallway only to find a security guard awaiting us, looking as surprised to see us as we were to see him. Guy sucker punched him in the face and the guard hit the floor with a loud thump, sounding like he'd been knocked out cold. My heart beat like a wild pack of horses as we raced through the facility and I pondered the feeling. *Wow, vampires really do have a heart.* Cheesy, I know, but a true realization.

But my contemplation didn't last long before a hand reached out and grabbed ahold of the back of my shirt, stopping me in my tracks. I turned and locked eyes with another security guard, his neck jiggling with anger. I grabbed him by the arms and threw him over me, his body flying against the front doors, shattering them as shards of glass scattered like spilled ice cubes in the moonlight. A flashing red light struck with the sound of the alarm, highlighting Guy's surprised face at what I'd done. I crinkled my nose. "Oops."

Guy looked at me as if I'd sprouted horns and I didn't blame him. Like me, he was just now realizing the magnitude of my strength. After a moment of shock, he sputtered out a laugh. "Let's get the hell outta here."

I nodded my agreement. "Let's."

FOURTEEN: RUBY

My mind whirled as we raced from the blood bank. The farther we went into the desert, the softer the wail of the alarm became. It was hard to comprehend what we'd just done, what *I* had just done. Not only was I an accomplice in a robbery, but the way I'd thrown the guard through the glass doors with such ease, blew my mind, yet I couldn't help but hope I hadn't caused any major damage.

As my mind raced, so did my legs, carrying me away through the darkness, my heart slamming hard inside of my chest. In the blink of an eye, Guy was gone and I found myself alone and panting over a rocky hill. I looked around, confused.

Crap. I was still getting used to my own speed and, in my haste, had bolted ahead at least thirty yards. I flashed back to Guy and slowed my pace to stay at his side.

"What're you trying to do?" he breathed, holding a hand over his chest theatrically. "Give me a heart attack?"

I snickered under my breath, amused by his reaction. After the shock of nearly getting caught began to dissipate, we continued walking together in silence for at least another hour, immersed in thought. The moon had cleared the sky and was nearing the desert horizon, indicating the approach of dawn. Temptation pulled me to a halt, unable to peel my eyes from the impending sunrise. Guy trudged off without me.

"C'mon Princess."

I scrunched my face in, taken aback by his comment.

"Princess?" I repeated, insult claiming my voice, not understanding what would give him the idea I deserved such a name.

Guy stopped for a moment and glanced back, his jaw twitching with discomfort. "Just… let's just get a move on." He started forward.

"No." I stood firm, causing him to stop again. Heat rose to my cheeks like the glow of red-hot metal. "Why did you call me Princess?"

I was confused by the name he called me. In our time together, I'd been a lot of things, but a freaking princess was the last thing that came to mind.

Guy sighed, rubbing his fingers over his tired face. "It was nothing. Let's just go."

I shook my head, anger fighting to break through my calm façade. "It's

not nothing. I want to know why you called me that?"

Guy huffed and trudged back to me. "I didn't mean it in a bad way. I just… you just seemed like one of those girls before you died…"

My face twisted in shock, a metaphorical knife slicing through my gut. "One of *those* girls? And what exactly do you mean by that?"

"You're taking it the wrong way, Faith. C'mon, we need to get somewhere for the day." He latched onto my arm, but I scoffed and ripped from his grasp.

"I don't think so. I'm not going anywhere with you until you explain yourself. What did you mean by 'Princess'?"

Guy shook his head and inhaled slowly. "You just struck me as a girl with a privileged life. A perfect family. You still had both of your parents. You were enrolled in college. Your nails even— when I found you— were perfectly manicured. I just meant that you seemed to have it all together. It's more a compliment than anything else."

Resentment tore through my chest like a lash and I clamped my hands to my hips, squaring my shoulders to him. "Oh, and because of that, you think you know me? You think you know anything about me? Well, you have another thing coming *Captain*, because you know nothing about my *privileged* life. You know nothing about my *perfect* family. So don't pretend you do." The wind whipped through the desert, lifting the fine hairs from my heated face. "Do you even know why I died? The reasoning behind it?"

Guy shook his head, something that could've been mistaken for shame covering his face. But I didn't care. I forged on, fury blazing through me.

"My father abandoned my mother when she was four months pregnant with me. And my parents had kept that little piece of information from me my entire life. They *lied* to me. They finally told me the *day* before my eighteenth birthday. And what do you think happened next?" I asked him, boring into him with my angry eyes.

Guy shrugged, digging the heel of his boot into the dirt. My fangs extended with rage as I continued. "Not an hour later, my boyfriend broke up with me, my best friend. The person who was supposed to be there for me. And then to top it all off, I died. I made the stupid mistake to go driving in a monsoon and I crashed my car into a tree. And died. And it was all my fault. I'm the reason I died. I'm to blame for turning into a damned vampire. I'm not perfect and I'm the farthest thing from a princess, *Captain Stone*."

I pressed my lips together in a thin line, my hands trembling at my sides. I almost felt bad for the way I was speaking to him. But he didn't know me, and I wouldn't allow him to presume that he did. I folded my arms over my chest, hoping to subdue my rage.

Guy frowned, looking down at his feet with remorse. "I… I didn't know…"

I glanced down too, staring at my flip-flops we'd gotten from the drugstore, my toes caked with dirt. Shame washed over me, subduing my

anger as I thought about the fact that Guy had done so much for me already, and thinking he couldn't have known about my life. He couldn't have known what I'd gone through in order to get to this point. Just like me, only having a glimpse into his background, I didn't fully know him. I heaved a sigh, letting my rage blow away with the expelled breath. I glanced up into his eyes.

"Of course you didn't know. I never told you."

"Look, Faith…" Cautious, Guy edged closer to me. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." He gingerly placed a hand on my shoulder, like you would to a wounded animal. The feel of his calloused fingers drew warmth to my skin and I clasped his hand with mine, a smile forming on my lips.

"It's okay. I overreacted. I just… this whole thing is just…"

"Crazy," we both said simultaneously. Our eyes met and we laughed. Guy slid an arm around my waist and drew me into his side. His breath tickled my ear.

"What do you say we find someplace where you won't turn into a vampire potato chip?"

"Sounds good." I smiled widely. "But if I do turn into a chip, I hope it's barbeque. That's my favorite."

Guy snorted and we walked together away from the illuminating horizon, toward the mountains, arm in arm. I glanced to my side wondering how long I'd have with him before we'd have to part ways—for I knew it would eventually happen. But for me, anytime was too soon.

FIFTEEN: RUBY

Within the hour, Guy and I made it to a decrepit one-story building. And it was a good thing, too, for the sun was a hair's breadth from rising over the mountains. Before us, stood a flickering neon sign. It flashed, *'The Lazy Motel'*.

"Stay here." Guy dodged into the building, leaving me alone in the parking lot. To the east, the sky blushed pink and purple as if bruised by the night, and it was obvious we didn't have much time.

I wondered what would happen if I ignored my instincts and stayed to watch the sun come up. Would my skin melt away from the heated light? Would I immediately combust into flames? I had a strange compulsion to find out, probably because I shouldn't. In my human life, I'd always done what had been asked of me, following the rules. But I'd changed since then, was more daring now. Death will do that to a person, I suppose.

Guy reappeared with a key, shaking me from my disturbing thoughts. He guided me to our room on the north end of the property, next to a retro-style soda vending machine.

Once inside, he drew the black-out curtains and bolted the door. One queen-sized bed stood in the middle of the room and next to it, a desk and chair. An old box TV sat atop a low dresser and a brass lamp hung in the corner of the room, casting a yellow glow over Guy's face. The room smelled of grilled cheese and mothballs. Classy.

"I'm going to shower up." Guy dropped his pack and weapons onto the desk. I plopped myself down on the lumpy bed as he closed himself in the bathroom. I laid back and gazed up at the popcorn ceiling, wondering how the hell I'd gotten myself into this mess.

In the span of just two nights I'd lost my family, my boyfriend, and my life. And the shitty thing was I knew I couldn't go back. Grief oozed through me like an overripe fruit. Images of a memory flashed to mind, John, my former boyfriend's voice breaking through the haze. I was immediately transported back to that night, the night of my death…

"Rubes…" John sighed, his breath crackling through the phone speaker. "I got accepted to ASU. I'm leaving tomorrow to check out the dorms."

My heart plummeted. "But…"

"It's better for me. It's a better scholarship. Some of the best pro football

players are recruited from ASU. I just… I can't pass it up."

I clasped the phone so hard, my knuckles ached. My heart raced, but I took a deep breath and reeled myself back in. I vaguely remembered trying to come up with a solution. And I vaguely remembered John shooting me down.

"I'm sorry Ruby. I didn't want it to end like this."

The rest of our heated conversation was a blur. It was buried beneath an avalanche of hurt, resentment, and betrayal. John had been my best friend, we'd grown up together, and now he was throwing it all away. Especially when I needed him most.

I barely remembered throwing my phone into the dirt at the park, and running to my house, to my car. I vaguely remembered climbing in and driving into the howling wind, fat raindrops spattering the windshield as I peeled from the drive. The radio was on, music blaring. Tears flooded my eyes.

I vaguely remembered the way the car wavered from the harsh winds and how the red taillights in front of me were barely visible through the rain.

I vaguely remembered feeling numb and outside of myself, as though it wasn't me in that car, as though the scenario wasn't happening to me. My life was over, the idyllic life I'd dreamed of all along. I'd always known John was a little self-centered at times, but had never realized he could hurt me this badly, just like my parents had. The signs had been there all along and I'd been such an idiot for not seeing it before. And my parents… I didn't even want to think about the turmoil they'd inflicted on me, the pain they'd caused me.

The thump of the music on the radio mirrored my pounding heart. It was fast, too fast. I swiped the tears from my eyes and looked down to turn the knob.

I vaguely remembered glancing back up, blurry darkness and swatches of color rushing toward me. Closer… closer…

Fear clawed through me and my scream was barely audible over the storm. I swerved and wavered, held my breath. The car careened and swayed in slow motion, like the soft rocking of a boat on water. It was like time stood still, locked in a frozen moment. The trees were too close now, branches scratching the hood. The car bucked and rumbled over rocky terrain. The darkness came closer… closer…

"Smells like grilled cheese in here." Guy's deep voice snapped me from the terrifying memory— or what might be better classified as a nightmare. I sat bolt upright, gasping for air. Had I been holding my breath?

"Are you all right?" he asked, a look of concern washing over his profile. He had shaved now, his angled jawbones smooth and flawless. He shifted and the smell of him blasted me like a gust of wind— crisp clean aftershave and fresh shampoo, nothing like the assaulting smell of mothballs and grilled cheese. And then I realize he'd asked me a question.

I nodded, releasing an audible breath. "I'm fine." But my voice broke,

signaling I wasn't okay, after all. My memory was growing clearer now, the details of my death sharp and vivid. But no matter how hard I strained, I was still unable to recall what happened next. I could not draw forth the chunk of time missing from my memory. The chunk of time where I was transported from the crash to the battle where I was turned. And more importantly, I couldn't remember who'd turned me into a vampire.

I exhaled loudly, infectious nostalgia twisting my insides. I felt ill. Ill over the memory that had consumed me like a plague, but I didn't want Guy to know that. He eyed me sideways, dubious.

"I'm fine. Really." I forced a laugh and turned my head, pretending to check out the room. I released my tightly clenched fists, and when he moved away, I resisted the urge to sigh with relief. It had only been a memory, but had hit me so hard, been so striking, that I felt like the crash had happened all over again. I looked down at my shaking hands and hid them in my lap.

I glanced back up at Guy, my lucid memory camouflaged by his strong presence. He towel-dried his hair, his bare chest rippling with muscles as he did so. The band of his pants rested just below his hips, showing the definition of his abs and the carved V that disappeared beneath. I quickly averted my eyes, my cheeks flushing hot. I shook my head, trying to reel myself back in, trying to forget the tempting man in my room and the way he made me feel — amongst other things that seemed oddly inappropriate at a time such as this.

I grabbed the remote for the TV from the bed stand and flicked it on, diverting my attention from the half-naked soldier, and the terrible flashback I'd had. I needed to pull myself together.

The early morning weather report was on, forecasting another week of triple-digit days. Maybe the one good thing about being a vampire in Arizona was I wouldn't have to endure the ridiculous summer heat anymore. I would just sleep right through it.

"Here." Guy offered me a glass filled with blood. I took it in my hand, scowling but he prodded me on. "You need to keep up your strength. You need to feed." I took a breath and held it to my lips.

This would be the first time I would ever drink human blood. The thought made me gag, but I knew it was inevitable. I was a vampire for goodness sake. And vampires drank blood.

"Go on," Guy urged. I closed my eyes tight and proceeded to drink.

But before the thick, cold, liquid even made it down my tongue I spit it back in the cup, holding back the puke that climbed up my throat.

"I can't. I just… can't." I wiped my mouth on the blanket.

"But you have to. You'll get weak without it."

I sniffed the liquid in my cup and wrinkled my nose. The taste on my tongue was metallic and stale. I stuck my hand out, offering it back to Guy. "I'm sorry. I… I can't drink it. I don't want to."

Guy frowned, accepting the cup back from me. He sighed. "You'll need to feed sooner or later. You can't starve yourself to death."

"Honestly I'm not hungry. And the thought of drinking human blood is just… it's just wrong."

Guy considered me for a minute, seemingly amused. "A vampire refusing the blood of humans. Now I've seen everything."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes and Guy went back in the bathroom, the sound of water trickling in the sink. But a news brief popped on the TV, catching my attention.

"This just in." An overly-tanned news anchor sat behind a long desk. "There appears to have been a break-in at the Bisbee City Blood Bank last night, where two security guards witnessed a man and a woman stealing bags of preserved blood. But according to one witness, this was no ordinary blood bank robbery."

"Oh—My—God." I gasped, concern gripping my chest. "Guy! Come here!"

Guy rushed from the bathroom while slipping on his dingy white T-shirt. He stood near the bed, gaping at the scene we'd visited earlier, a similar expression on his face as the one I held.

A female reporter posed in front of the building, next to one of the security guards. I recognized him as the one I'd pushed through the glass doors.

"Yes Bill," the woman said, smiling, "And what could be stranger than a blood bank robbery? Let me tell you; a blood bank robbery by vampires." She turned to the shaken guard. "Why would anyone want to steal blood from a blood bank?" She held out the microphone for him.

"I suppose if they were vampires they would need blood to drink." The man resembled a scared rabbit, his eyes large and the skin of his neck shaking.

The woman laughed. "Vampires you say? And how many of these… *vampires* were there?"

"One male and one female," he answered frankly, unaware of the woman's amusement.

The reporter shot a dubious glance at the camera. "Did they have fangs?"

"Yes. Well, the female did at least. Right before she pushed me through those glass doors." He gestured to the shattered glass behind him.

"So a female vampire threw you through those doors right there?" The woman was clearly entertained by the interview.

"Why yes, ma'am. She sure did."

The reporter chuckled. It was obvious neither she, nor anyone else believed him. I sort of felt bad for the guy.

The woman turned to the camera again. "Well there are only sixty days until Halloween. It's quite possible the vampires are preparing early this year."

The male and female news anchors doubled over with laughter, but anger crossed the security guard's face.

"Damn it!" Guy surprised me by snatching the remote from me and

clicking off the TV. He threw it across the room. “So much for being discrete.” He paced back and forth, running his fingers through his damp hair in frustration. His brows came together in a straight line of fury.

“It’s okay…” I waved it away with my hand. “They didn’t believe him anyway.”

“It’s not *them* I’m worried about.” He turned off the lamp in the corner, not even caring to ask if I was ready for bed or not. The room was pitch black, though I could see just fine. “Now get some sleep,” he grunted. So much for his softer side. Captain Impossible was back.

I sat there in the dark for a moment while Guy grabbed a pillow from the bed and adjusted himself on the floor.

I leaned out over the side of the bed. “Are you going to get in trouble? For helping me?” He pulled a blanket over himself and placed his wooden stake nearby, on the floor. I wondered if he was still threatened by me.

He let out the slightest of sighs. It would’ve been inaudible with human hearing, but was clear as day with my new senses.

“If I can get back to headquarters within a few days there should be no problem. I can come up with something. But any longer than that and I will have some trouble. There will be questions…”

I realized how much Guy was laying on the line for me. He was jeopardizing his career, his life, for me. Why, though? I knew it had something to do with Lily, the girl he tried to save from the vampires. Did he see a connection there? Was I awakening some memory in him, some unforgettable time in his life?

“What’re we going to do tonight when we wake up?” I snuggled into the bed and inspected a tiny slice of sunlight trying to force its way past the edge of the dark curtains. If Guy didn’t care about me, he could’ve ripped open those curtains and burned me alive. But he hadn’t.

“I’m taking you to someone that can help you.” His voice still held a tinge of irritation.

“Can they cure me?” I pulled the flimsy comforter up to my chin and watched a fly skitter up the wall.

Guy rumbled and I heard him changing positions on the floor. “There’s no cure for vampirism. But I know someone that might be able to find you a safe haven, a place where you can learn to be what you are.”

Disappointment sank through me, thwarting the hope I’d had for returning to my human self. He’d said it; there was no cure for what I’d become. And although I’d suspected this all along, I had still hoped for a miracle.

I took a deep breath and watched the fly zip off and disappear into the other side of the room, thinking I wanted to take a shower but was too tired to do so. I closed my eyes, quickly falling into a dreary state of slumber. I was exhausted and, for the first time in days, I slept deeply. The fog of unconsciousness pulled me under with hazy dreams and memories. The hours

flew by unaccounted for. I saw rain and looming trees. I saw John in his football uniform. I saw my mom and dad's faces, crying.

They looked so sad, but in their imaginary presence, I felt a warmth I'd almost forgotten existed. My heart ached for them. My heart ached for the way I'd reacted to the news of my biological father. It wasn't their fault. I wanted to hug my dad and tell him I was sorry. I yearned to tell him I still loved him no matter what and that he'd always be my father. I reached out to their sad faces, but they began to fade away, too late now. I cried out to my dad. His green eyes sparkled and his dark hair, so unlike mine, lay across his forehead. But he turned to dust, the pieces of the dream floating away.

I lifted my lashes, sorrow tumbling through me like boulders. I was fully aware of the dream that left me hollow and empty. But I continued to lie still, listening to Guy's soft breathing. He was still asleep, body splayed across the floor and arm thrown over his pillow. I gazed at the curtains and where the small slice of light had been coming through before. But it was now dark, signaling the fall of night. We must've been sleeping for hours, though it felt like only seconds.

I eased from the bed and slipped on my shoes. I wondered if I should acquiesce my inner desire to go and see my family. It had been on my mind ever since Guy found me and I couldn't ignore it anymore. The notion that they were still out there, mourning my loss when I wasn't really gone, wrenched my heart.

Without allowing enough time to second-guess myself, I slipped out of the motel room and into the early hours of night.

SIXTEEN: GUY

I'd tossed and turned for the better part of the day, unable to sleep. Worry over that damned blood bank robbery we'd committed clouded my thoughts. I wasn't sure what footage the security cameras had caught and I wasn't sure how much time I had before FUSE made the connection and came looking for me. But the most terrifying thought trumped all the others, my bond to the vampire.

Though I wasn't aware at the time, by drinking Ruby's blood I'd bonded myself to her. But how? The concept overwhelmed me.

I lay restless on the motel floor, trying to recall any information I'd gathered on the topic of bonding. Usually, it was between two vampires. It was very unlikely for a human and an Unfortunate to bond, though on rare occasion, it'd been done. And for the vampires, it was a serious decision. Not only did it involve the exchange of blood, but it held an emotional tie as well, like an agreement. They would always be connected on a deeper level. There was love involved. Though before now, I'd always thought it silly. How could anyone love an Unfortunate, even the vampires themselves? They were beastly and wretched, murderers of the night. They were inhuman and incapable of human feelings— or so I'd been taught.

That's why I was astounded when I felt that unmistakable pull toward Ruby, like magnets. It started small like the wisp of a breeze, sensing her anger and sorrow. But when it fully hit me, it was as if a hurricane of emotions slammed into me, like I'd known her my entire life.

And when she confessed to me the moments leading up to her death, the moment she found out about her father, sorrow crashed through me like a wrecking ball and I felt it just as she did. Not only could I feel her sorrow, but I could sense the way she felt about me. I could feel the way she trusted me. God, I didn't know why. She shouldn't trust me, but dang it if she did.

I wasn't sure exactly how it happened either, the bonding. I hadn't wanted it to happen, of course and in all honesty, the notion of being connected to a vampire never crossed my mind. The chances were one in a million. But in my defense, I'd been drained of my blood and was near death at the time. Worry about being forever bonded to a vampire hadn't been at the top of my priority list. How could I have known by drinking her blood I would forever be connected to her? It was bizarre and completely ironic. I,

Captain Guy Stone, renowned vampire hunter and illustrious leader of FUSE, was, in fact bonded to a vampire.

When realizing my bond, I resisted the urge to laugh crazily while lying on the floor of the hotel room. For hours, I laid pondering what the hell had happened. I found it funny that I'd thought my situation tough before. But now it was impossible. How was I supposed to go back to my old life and keep those same morals and ideals I'd had before? How could I ever show my face in front of my men again? My General?

I'd have to lie. It was the only way.

And of course, I hadn't told Ruby of my bond to her and I presumed I never would. Yes, I was bonded to her, but she was not bonded to me, and I couldn't allow her to know of my connection to her. It was the best for both of us that way.

God, I wished I'd never decided to save the girl in the first place, but I couldn't imagine going back and reacting any other way now that I knew her. And now I would be haunted for the rest of my life by the ghost of a vampire girl.

In the late hours of the afternoon, I found myself finally settling into sleep unable to fight the exhaustion anymore. I was pulled into the darkness of my mind, but the realization of my situation never fully left me.

Ruby's name floated through my mind like the breeze through the clouds. She was with me at all times now and I could feel her, sense her, and taste her lips as though she were standing right before me.

Ruby…

Seconds turned to minutes, minutes to hours, and time flew by unaccounted for in my uneasy slumber.

I yawned and stretched my arms in the darkness, knowing before I even opened my eyes that something was wrong, like the sinking sensation you get during a nightmare.

Ruby…

I sat up and looked around the dark motel room, my stomach clenching with fear. She was gone, the blankets on the empty bed rumpled and askew.

I rubbed the grit from my eyes and looked again.

"Faith?" I called out in case she was in the restroom. "Faith? You here?" I jumped from the floor and flew to the bathroom. Yep, she was gone. *Shit.*

I slapped on my boots and gathered my gear, leaving the room key on the table. I needed to find her quickly, before anyone else did. Before another vampire who felt threatened by her or, God forbid, FUSE.

If I hadn't been so worried, I'd have almost deemed the situation funny. Irony be damned, I was about to embark on a journey like I had years ago. Except this time I wouldn't be searching for the vampire that had taken a girl, I would be searching for a girl who was now a vampire.

SEVENTEEN: RUBY

The haze from the sunset clung to the distant mountains, the sky a muddled grey. The air was warm and dry as it should be in late August. I crossed the motel parking lot to the main road, the smell of fried grease choking the breeze. I felt bad leaving Guy lying there asleep, unaware of my departure. He'd probably freak when he woke up and found me gone, but I had to see my family. I had to know if my mom and dad were okay. I wasn't sure what I'd do when I got there or if I'd reveal myself to them or not. Guy had firmly instructed me not to, but I just had to go, to see if they were all right.

I shook my head at my silliness. Of course, they were all right. My mother was one of the strongest women I knew and my father was a tough man as well. They would be fine.

Maybe I wasn't going for them, after all. Maybe I was going for me. To relieve the guilt over my actions. To mourn the loss of myself. To gain some sort of closure to my situation.

I wasn't worried about how to get there. My body had already proven itself as a speed-induced traveling machine and our motel wasn't that far outside of Bisbee. I knew my hometown well and the small city was easily walkable. I sped off in the direction of my east-side neighborhood, the one I'd grown up in for seventeen— no, eighteen years of my life. I laughed, realizing my birthday had come and gone, passed in the hours of turning into a vampire. Ha. Happy Birthday to me.

I pushed away the unpleasant thought and made my way home. Blurs of colors whirred by me as I rushed through town, my mind focused on one thing only— my family. But I screeched to a halt when I heard someone crying out for help. I let the sound guide me and stopped so hard that my momentum had me toppling over. This whole fast-as-lightning thing was going to take some getting used to.

I brought myself up straight and blinked my eyes to get my bearings. I was downtown in a dark alleyway. The three-story Victorian buildings towered over me, casting the alley into deep shadow. There was a woman on the ground crying, a man on top of her. My town had always been peaceful and for a population of only 5,000 the crime rate was next to nothing. So I was shocked to see the man pull out a knife and hold it to the woman's throat,

demanding she hand over her money. He didn't seem to know I was there.

Fear dredged up my insides like stomach bile and my mind spun, trying to come up with a solution. Maybe there was a police officer nearby and I could call for help. But by then, the woman could be hurt, or worse. It was up to me to do something. I had to stop this. But how?

Anger finally tore through me at the situation, at the man who thought he could take advantage of the woman. My fangs shot forth and my heart rampaged in my chest. Realization that I was more than just a girl hit me. I was a vampire and could easily rip the man's throat out. But I was no murderer, even if this guy was a low-life piece of crap. Yes, I'd killed a vampire when Guy's life was on the line. But to kill a human?

"Leave her alone," I found myself saying without the decision to do so.

The man flinched and turned to me from his knees. He was thin and scruffy. His eyes held something deep, dark, and malevolent. Ruthless. This wasn't just some desperate homeless person needing money for food. This was a man who would take the woman's life without any regret. He was evil.

He smiled, his teeth black and missing in spots. "Why don't you do what's best for yourself, Blondie, and mind your own business."

The woman squirmed beneath him, her eyes flooded with tears. The knife pressed into her throat and our eyes met.

"I don't think so." I slid my gaze to the man, my hands fisting at my sides. It was all I could do to hold back the pulsing rage inside of me.

The man laughed, his voice raspy and raw. A car alarm sounded off somewhere in the distance. "What? Do you want in on the action, Blondie? You want to take the place of this tramp?" He pressed the blade further into her neck, drawing a drop of blood.

Rage engrossed me. I clenched my teeth, my fangs biting into my lower lip. "I wouldn't do that if I were you." The man chuckled at me.

"I'll give you a choice," he said, his hands shaking dangerously. Fear jetted through me that he would accidentally cut her before he meant to. He rasped his next words. "You can walk away now and pretend you never saw anything. Or you can join us and I will kill both you and the tramp. What do you say?"

The woman whimpered under the pressure of the weapon. Her gaze pleaded me not to leave her. I gave her a reassuring nod, implying she would be okay.

"No." I took one step closer. "I will give *you* a choice." The wind blew through the alley, whipping my hair around my face. Bravery I never knew before coursed through me, reinforcing my motives. "You can let her go and turn yourself in. Or, I can kill you with my bare hands."

At my threat, the criminal's brows shot straight up and after one long moment, he burst into psychotic laughter. "What're you going to do Rapunzel, strangle me with your hair?" His little quip burned through my veins, but he turned away from me and leaned over the woman, his mouth against her ear.

“Don’t worry, darlin.’ This will only hurt for a minute.”

In the time it takes someone to blink, and before the man could take another breath, I had him slammed into the wall, holding him up off the ground by his neck. Despite my rage, I smiled wide to make sure he saw my fangs. His eyes enlarged with fear and his chest shook with the effort to breathe.

The woman scrambled along the ground, holding her hand to her neck. I addressed her calmly. “Get somewhere safe. And call the police station. Tell them to be expecting someone very soon.”

She shifted her gaze back and forth from me to the man. I sensed her fear. It billowed off her in waves like ink in water.

“Go!” I yelled. She nodded and stumbled out of the alleyway, leaving Mr. Charming and me all alone. I turned my attention to him as he sputtered and gasped for air. I lowered my voice to a whisper.

“No, I will not strangle you with my hair. But I can sink my fangs into your neck and drain the blood from your body. But not all of it, no. Only enough to keep you aware of your body shutting down. Aware of how death feels as it creeps up on you. And then I can leave you all alone to ponder your life. To think about all the hurt you’ve caused others.” The man whimpered, his mouth open like a fish out of water. The vein in his neck throbbed.

“Do you know what dying feels like?” I asked, fury tearing through my body. But my voice came out even and calm, belying my ire. Because of my experience of dying, I’d have thought I’d never wish death on another human being. But in that moment, I wasn’t so sure.

He shook his head. It took all I had not to kill him right then and there, my hands shaking with rage. But I was no murderer and I couldn’t let my vampire instincts take over. I struggled to keep control.

“Good.” I spotted a piece of tattered rope on the ground. “Because if the way you smell is any indication of how you taste, I wouldn’t even want to try it.”

I let go of his neck and snatched up the rope, then grabbing him hard by the shoulders. He gasped and coughed. “I hope you enjoy prison food.”

I rushed both of us through town to the Bisbee Police Department. The street was empty and, as usual, there was nothing going on. I was glad. I couldn’t let anyone see me this way. And God forbid I see anyone I knew— it was very likely in such a small town.

I dropped the villain to the ground and stood over him on the front steps of the station. Again, I bared my fangs to him and he cried out. I smirked at his reaction, surprising myself with my boldness. I leaned down and dragged him to a flagpole standing out front. I took each of his arms and bound them to the steel pole with the rope. He tried to wriggle backwards, but I held him steady.

“I can’t have you running away, now can I?”

“Please,” he whined. “Please. No.”

"Don't worry, Darlin'." I tugged on the rope to make sure of my work and then got to my knees next to him. "This will only hurt for a minute."

I punched him hard, knocking him out cold. My eyes went wide with shock. I'd hit him harder than I intended. Luckily, he still breathed. I gave him one last disgusted glance before rushing off into the darkness.

I waited in the shadows, hoping the woman had called the station. Sure enough, seconds later, three officers bounded through the doors to find the man limp on the ground. They glanced around and I ducked back farther. Seeing nothing, they undid the rope and handcuffed him, then dragged him inside. I wiped my hands on my pants, as though to wipe the dirtiness of the criminal off. My arms trembled and my heart thudded. I couldn't believe what I'd just done. I couldn't believe my own strength or the rage that accompanied it. It was foreign to me. I didn't feel like myself. But I was me. Only a stronger, scarier version.

I let myself fall against the side of a building, panting. Oh my God, I was out of control. Yes, I'd saved the woman's life, but fear struck me at how close I'd been to killing that man. I was coming to realize I could kill anyone at any time, with the greatest of ease. I was a monster. I wondered what mom and dad would think of me now— their sweet little daughter with fangs and claws and the temper of an enraged bull.

But that thought brought me back to the task at hand— my family. How could I allow myself to go near them again? I'd already killed one vampire and now I'd been so close to killing a human as well. I wasn't sure I could justify putting my family in danger like that.

My brain struggled with itself, my conscience trying to talk me out of going home. I wondered if I could control myself. Of course, I'd like to believe I'd never harm my family. But how did I know for sure that my primal instinct wouldn't rear its ugly head and make me do terrible things to them? I shook my head, uncertainty running through me.

A dog barked somewhere nearby and the wind picked up speed. No, I needed to go. I needed to see for myself that they were safe and well, even if it meant lurking in the shadows at a safe distance. I sighed deeply and, willing up the energy to do so, bolted through the town, heading east.

I zigzagged through roadways and alleys, the wind stinging my skin, the chill of rushing air prickling my arms and face. Finally reaching the end of our lane, I came to an abrupt halt. The streetlights cast their hazy glow, showing smooth asphalt beneath.

It was an eerie sensation going back there. A tingling I couldn't quite place rushed through my body. Everything was the same. The same row of shrubbery lined the streets. The same cars were parked out in front of their homes. The same smell of orange trees hung in the air. But it was different somehow, as though without me, life had gone on as usual. But oddly enough, I thought I sensed my parents' heartache throbbing deep in my chest, even from this distance. They would never be the same. *I* would never be the same.

The lights from the little two-story townhomes flickered on, the people within settling in to watch the nightly news or having their nighttime snack. A car drifted by, the sound of it more intense than I remembered a car ever sounding. I could hear each pebble, each grain of dirt crunching beneath the rubber. The person inside glanced out their window at me, their face twisting oddly. Their eyes went wide as if seeing a ghost.

My heart dropped to my feet.

It was my father.

EIGHTEEN: GUY

I paced the dark motel parking lot and checked my watch; it flashed Eleven p.m. I had about six hours until sunrise. I needed to act fast if I were to find Ruby before she was turned into vampire toast— not to mention all the trouble she could get herself into before then. If FUSE found her before I did, I'd have a lot of explaining to do. It would mean my job, and quite possibly, my life.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone. I stared at the blank screen and powered it on. I had turned it off after taking Ruby to the mission, knowing I could be tracked, but now I needed it. It was risky, but I had to find Ruby and I had a feeling I knew where she was. I took a deep breath and dialed.

"This is Kemp," the soldier said on the other line.

I sighed with relief. It was my intelligence officer, Todd Kemp. He was the closest thing I had to a friend. If anyone could help me, he could.

"Todd. I need you to do something for me." A neon light flickered above, making the scene surreal and dreamlike. A moment of silence passed.

"Captain Stone? Thank God you're okay. No one at headquarters has seen you for days. We were beginning to think you'd gone MIA."

I took a calming breath and steeled myself for the lie I was about to tell. "I'm fine. Just need to take a few personal days. A family matter."

A rumbling motorcycle pulled into the motel parking lot, making it hard for me to hear.

Picking up on this, Todd asked, "Sir, Where are you?"

"That doesn't matter." The motorcycle rider parked his vehicle a few spaces away and turned off its engine. He nearly fell off his bike, wavering drunk. He stumbled into the motel bar. My eyes lingered after him. "What matters is, I need your help."

Todd fell silent for a moment, registering what I'd said. "Uh… Of course, Captain. What do you need?"

"I need you to find the address of someone belonging to this name in Bisbee, Arizona. Ruby Carter. Female. About… eighteen years old."

"Hang on."

The clicking of computer keys came through the speaker. Then a pause.

"Here it is. Um… Ruby Carter. Bisbee, Arizona. Age seventeen."

My heart lifted. “That’s it.”

“Um… Captain…” Todd hesitated. “Says here the person in question is deceased.”

I was taken aback, but only momentarily. Most humans-turned-vampires weren’t marked as dead. A lot of them, especially teens, were tagged as missing or as runaways. But of course, Ruby was deceased. She’d told me about the car accident. It made sense now. But that offered me another question.

“Are there any police reports attached to that name?”

More clicking through the phone. “Nope. Just a coroner’s report and death certificate. The report states that she died from the impact of a car crash, and from the heat of an explosion. The body was unable to be autopsied due to being completely incinerated.”

I frowned, finding the information strange. “Was there a memorial?”

“Not that I see here. But I can look more into it for you.”

“No, that’s fine.”

I’d never come across a situation like this before. According to Todd, all of the reports were cut and dry. She’d died, being incinerated in the accident. But I knew that wasn’t the case, for I’d seen her with my own eyes, touched her body with my own hands. I supposed it was the only likely outcome the police could agree upon when unable to find her remains…

But that brought me to the conclusion that her maker was very clever, and fast, probably sneaking her body away from the wreck before it exploded. It hadn’t just been a random decision or afterthought, there was too much detail involved. It had to have been perfectly timed and placed. I shook my head from the thought. I was no private investigator. I was a FUSE Captain who would likely lose his job, and life, if I didn’t clean up the mess I’d made.

“And the address?” I asked.

“Okay. The address is 8344 East Sunbrook Lane. Major cross roads are Highland and Park.”

I knew the location of the neighborhood. It was a very small town, and since having a temporary FUSE headquarters set up in Bisbee, I’d studied it relentlessly. I knew it like the back of my own hand.

“Perfect.”

I went to hang up but Todd stopped me. “Wait, Sir. Are you all right?”

I scrubbed my face with my hand. “Yes. Like I said, family matters.” The neon sign above me buzzed, adding to the growing anxiety in my stomach. I didn’t have much time. “Listen, Kemp…”

“Yeah?” Todd replied.

“If General Brandt calls, tell him I needed a few personal days. That is all. Keep this conversation to yourself. It’s confidential.”

“Sure. Of course.”

“Great.” I dropped my cell phone to the ground and crushed it with my boot. I’d get a new one once all this was over. I couldn’t chance being

tracked. Especially now, with what I'd done. Abandoning my soldiers. Helping an Unfortunate escape. Committing a robbery. I barely had time to regret my treasonous decisions when my eyes landed on the lone motorcycle sitting next to me. That would be one more tick on my list of criminal activities. I shrugged, making my way to my new bike.

Unfortunately the owner of the bike hadn't been drunk enough to leave his keys in the ignition. I shifted my gaze across the dingy motel and saw what I needed. I went to the wall and ripped a light from the adobe, leaving a large hole there reminiscent of Ruby's knob-breaking skills. Sparks shot from the building and wires hung from the sconce in my hand. I took out my pocketknife and clipped off a small portion of wire.

"Now for some wheels." I climbed atop the Harley. With little effort, I rigged my wires to the connector of the bike. I flipped the ignition switch and smiled when it roared in response. I guess my hotwire training hadn't been useless after all.

I attached my pack to the back of the bike and lifted the kickstand. Realizing there was no helmet, I slid on a pair of dark sunglasses to shield my eyes for the ride. I could already tell this was going to be a long night.

~*~

I roared down the highway, heading east toward Ruby's house. I wasn't worried about finding her. She'd be there. That was where all the Newborns went. Home.

It was quite sad really, because they didn't understand. They couldn't comprehend that their families wouldn't want them anymore. Not with what they'd become. I'd seen it a hundred times, and mostly we'd catch them before they scared the daylights out of their unassuming families. But, on the rare occasion they did make it home to reveal their new selves to their loved ones, we had to do major damage control.

We'd call our associates, the Unfortunates who worked for us, to come in and erase their memories. Certain vampires had that special ability and those were the ones most useful to us. But being an associate with FUSE was like being a prisoner. I hoped to God that wouldn't happen with Ruby. I still found myself wondering why I cared.

But there was something about her, something making me want to— no, *need* to protect her. And that something must've been pretty big for me to change my entire life around.

In the span of a few days, I'd gone from being a devout Captain in the FUSE army, solidly loyal to my revenge, to nothing more than a traitor. I'd begun to question my own morals and loyalties. And now, instead of killing Ruby as I should have, I was on my way to help her. I released a wry laugh. Oh well, there's no going back now.

I took a hairpin curve in the road and flew through a red light. Desert bushes and cactus flashed by me in a blur, bringing my attention to my location. I slowed the motorcycle to a crawl when I found the eastside

neighborhood, a quaint little suburban community with Spanish-style two-story homes, one right after the next. The street lamps cast a dull glow onto the pavement and I pulled off into a visitor parking area.

I didn't want to get too close too soon and scare her or her family. I needed to treat this situation delicately. I needed to get Ruby back and take her somewhere safe. Somewhere she could be with others like her and not fear for her life. Then I could go back to work as usual and try to forget about this whole fiasco.

I walked down one street and then another. I scanned the house numbers, recalling Ruby's address my intelligence officer had given me. But I stopped dead in my tracks. There, about six houses down, I saw Ruby. She stood on the sidewalk in front of the house with the tire swing.

I tried to ignore the pull she had on me, but my heart squeezed in my chest at her beautiful form, a vision of pure perfection. She held something in her hands and gazed down at it longingly. Her platinum hair hung in long curls down her back and fluttered in the cool night breeze. Her delicate arms trembled.

And in that moment, I realized just how much I was attracted to her, but my former self would've laughed over the idea of a human finding a vampire desirable. Yes, she was still a woman and I a man, but the whole I-will-suck-your-blood thing made the situation rather complicated.

What was I thinking? Of course, it would be complicated. More than complicated. *Impossible*. It would be different if I were just some normal guy, a school teacher or something. But I was one of the most influential officers in the Faction of Unfortunate Souls Elimination. I was her enemy. The government had put their trust in me and I'd vowed my undying loyalty to their cause. *My* cause.

I shrugged off my crazy musings and took a step forward. I must complete my mission, and then get back to headquarters. But before I even had time to finish that thought, Ruby collapsed on the ground, shoulders shaking silently.

My heart wrenched with sympathy, making it hard to breathe, and I struggled with the feeling. I'd seen many Unfortunates break under the realization that their lives had changed forever and I'd never batted an eye. But now, I was witnessing compassion within myself and, God, pure desire to wrap my arms around this girl. I felt like I was dying inside right along with her, her sadness like a storm cloud blocking out the sun.

I edged closer to her delicate body, crumpled up like a wet blanket, her head down, her hair covering her face like sheer curtains.

I couldn't help it. Ruby Carter, my vampire Faith, had done something to me I never thought possible. She'd made me feel again.

NINETEEN: RUBY

Grief ripped a hole through my chest upon seeing my father's face from the window of his car. Guilt shattered my insides. There I stood, looking into my dad's eyes wondering how I could ever make it up to him, the way I'd treated him. The dad I'd been so unkind to. The father I'd cursed for not being my blood, when all he'd done was raise me the best he could. There I stood, empty-hearted, on the street I'd grown up on. My *old* house. I would never live there again.

Heartache and homesickness crashed down on me like a ton of bricks, my breath catching in my chest when our eyes locked. I saw his mind working at the sight of me. I knew I looked like a completely different person with my white hair and purple eyes, but even so, the look on my dad's face was pained with recognition. He was confused. He knew I was dead. And I was, for all intents and purposes, dead.

But seeing me now probably cast doubts into his mind. Maybe he thought me a ghost or some figment of his imagination.

I wanted to run to him. I wanted to chase down the car, fling open the door, and throw myself at him. I wanted to tell him that he *was* my dad— the only dad I would ever have— and I loved him so dearly. I wanted my daddy to hold me in his arms as he'd done many a night when I was scared or sad. The realization of how much I missed him hit me like a semi, knocking me breathless.

My eyes welled with tears at the sight of him. He'd looked scared when he saw me. He looked terrified, sad, and hurt. I didn't want that. I didn't want to hurt him.

Yes, I could grant my parents temporary relief and happiness they would never expect by showing up at their door. But that would only be the beginning of an epic disappointment when they found out the monster I'd become. I wasn't their precious little girl anymore. Hell, I wasn't even human. I was something completely different. And I could kill them in the blink of an eye.

Though it only took the span of a few seconds, the car seemed to drive by me in slow motion. My father's green eyes locked on mine and the car screeched to a stop. Before my mind made the decision to do so, I disappeared into the darkness. I peered from afar, as my dad got out of the car and looked

around.

Loss pounded painfully through me as I watched him sigh and shake his head. He'd seen me, but wasn't exactly sure. He probably thought his mind was playing tricks on him. He reluctantly reentered the automobile and drove away.

I stayed crouched in the bushes for what must've been hours, stuck in a numb stupor. The grief over seeing my father was overwhelming. I contemplated my old life versus my new life. I contemplated my death, all the while listening to the loud hum of the crickets and the beating of my own heart.

Once I was sure the neighborhood slept, I stumbled awkwardly down the lane to my old home. Darkness descended, no lights visible except the moon's blue glow blanketing the little house. The roof shingles glittered and the white shutters shone faintly. The lawn hadn't been mowed and the weeds stood thick and overgrown.

I gazed at the tire swing hanging from the Mesquite tree in the front yard. I saw myself there as a little girl, kicking my legs and laughing happily. I saw my mom and dad sitting on the porch, drinking lemonade while I played with the neighbor kids on a summer morning. I saw the row of bricks encircling the tree trunk where I had tripped and broken my leg. I saw the grass lawn where I'd laid late at night with my mother and watched the lightning storms roll in. I saw my life all wrapped up like a package in brick and wood and memories long forgotten…

"Ruby girl," my dad would say. "One day this house will be yours. And then your children's. And then theirs."

"Of course, daddy," I'd reply. "I love this house. You couldn't keep me out of it if you wanted to."

I recalled his laugh, deep and familiar. It always brought a smile to my face.

But just like that, it was all gone. It would never be my home and I would never have a family of my own…

Overcome by emotion, I bolted across the street, over the back wall, and into the back door of the house, which was never locked. For fear of waking my parents, I only allowed myself enough time to swipe a picture from the wall, one that showed my parents, smiling and happy. I discarded the frame and kept the thin portrait tucked in my hands.

I darted back to the street, my anxious heart pumping loudly in my ears. I gazed down at the picture, at their faces, somehow knowing they'd forgiven me. I knew my mom forgave me for storming out, when all she wanted was to tell me the truth. And I knew my dad forgave me for looking at him with such disdain when I found he was not my biological father.

But what I wasn't sure of is if they forgave me for dying in the first place. For permanently leaving them. I hoped they didn't blame themselves for my death. I hoped that night wouldn't plague them for the rest of their

lives. The thought was more than I could handle. I gazed at the tire swing swaying in the front yard and knew what I had to do.

I made my way to the large tree, but stopped still, Guy's warning flashing through my mind. He'd said after turning, Unfortunates were not to see their families ever again. I let the thought sink in, but after a moment, shook my head and sat on the circle of bricks beneath the tree anyway— the place I'd broken my leg years ago. Guy had said I couldn't *call* or *see* my family. But he hadn't said I couldn't leave them a *message*.

I laid my parents' picture in my lap and proceeded to gather pebbles from the ground. Once having enough to accomplish my plan, I began strategically placing the little rocks beside me in a distinct pattern. After finishing, I stood and admired my work. There on the bricks I'd spelled out the words 'I'm okay,' with a small 'R' for Ruby beside them.

I knew it wasn't much and wouldn't even begin to answer my parents' questions— in retrospect, probably causing even more— but in the back of their minds, it might at least offer them a bit of comfort.

I retreated back to the sidewalk and gazed back down at the picture of Mom and Dad. I held it to my chest as though it were a balm to heal my aching wounds. I would never see my family again, but I would also never forget them. The picture in my hand would be a sweet reminder of what I was forced to leave behind.

I sniffed and gave the house one long gaze before I turned to go. But something caught my eye on the porch, a woven piece of fabric lying over the porch swing. It was my mother's sweater. She must've left it there by accident. Even from this distance, I could smell her scent on it— lavender and vanilla. The way she always smelled when she'd kiss me goodnight. I couldn't hold it back anymore.

I collapsed against the sidewalk in front of my house and let the tears of my mourning fall, uninhibited and relentless. Violent sobs wracked my chest and my quivering breath came out in a low, melancholy moan.

The touch of Guy's hand on my shoulder didn't surprise me. I'd sensed him there since I'd laid out the message. But in my current state of devastation, I didn't care. I didn't care about anything, the pain over losing my family crushing my insides like a loathsome weight.

"It's okay." He knelt on the ground next to me. He scooped me up in his arms, cradling my head against his chest. "It's time to let go."

TWENTY: RUBY

Seeing my dad that way, confused and heartbroken, had been one of the hardest moments I'd ever experienced— except for dying in a car crash and turning into a vampire, I suppose. But nonetheless, it killed me inside. It was as if someone had opened up my ribs like a birdcage, plucked out my heart, and squeezed it until it popped. My chest was left aching and empty.

This was it. This was the time to say goodbye to everything I knew. My dad. My mom. My home. My life. Guy had told me it would be this way, but the severity of the situation hadn't hit me until that moment. It was like a freight train of realization slamming me over and over, each car painfully taking my breath away. To say that I was devastated would be a huge understatement.

It was gone. All gone. And what did I have to show for it? Nothing but a pair of fangs and a strange ability to speed through town like superwoman. Not my idea of a fair trade.

After letting me break down for what must've been hours, Guy hefted me into his arms and carried me away from my home. My *old* home. We went down the street, across a lawn, and into the parking lot of a local school. I was probably strong enough to walk myself, but I allowed him to help me. My mental state left me physically drained.

He sat me down on my feet and took my chin between his thumb and forefinger, tilting my eyes up to meet his. "You all right?"

I let out a shaky breath, but nodded. At that moment, I wasn't all right. But knowing I'd left my parents a message, somehow made me feel better. I knew, one day, I would eventually be okay and they would too.

Guy glanced at the picture in my hands and I wondered if he knew what I'd done. But if he did, he said nothing of it. He pulled his pack from a motorcycle in the lot.

"We haven't much time. I need to get you to someone that can help. And we need to be quick about it."

"Is that yours?" I pointed at the Harley, swiping away my tears.

"No. And neither is this one." He walked over to the large blue truck next to it and pulled a couple of tools from his pack.

He clinked through the tools and realization hit me. "You're stealing a truck?" My voice took on the high pitch of a squealing young child.

With crowbar in hand, Guy jammed it in the crevice between the truck and window. He stopped, glancing at me. "It's more like borrowing."

I snorted —something I tended to do when overtaken by intense emotion. Not only was I dejected by leaving my home for what I suspected the last time ever, but now I was about to join Guy in stealing a vehicle. My life didn't make any more sense than using a sterile needle for a lethal injection. I studied him as he worked.

"Ha. So we are going to return it when we're done?"

He rolled his eyes and stopped again. "Yes."

The passenger's side door of the truck popped open. Guy made a grand gesture for me to sit, bowing down as if we were at some formal ball or something. I snorted again, but hopped in despite my doubts. The truck smelled like it had been freshly washed, the pungent scent of a dangling tree-shaped air freshener filling my nose. The leather of the seat stuck to the backs of my knees and I shifted uncomfortably. Guy jumped in the driver's side and fiddled with something up under the dash and slid me a sideways glance.

"I know how hard this must be for you. But it's for the best. I promise."

I tucked my family picture under my folded hands. Of course, it was hard. It was the most horrible thing ever. I'd lost my family and Guy was all I had now. Even though I trusted him, I still wasn't sure that I should. I mean, he'd said he'd been doing this a long time and knew a lot about vampires, but he was my supposed enemy. Should I be letting him take me away? Should I simply abandon my family? The clinking of Guy's tools overtook my questions and I stopped and watched him work.

"Who's this person you're taking me to?" I was sick of Guy's discreet manner and just wanted the facts. If I was being forced to leave my family, I at least deserved to know what I was in for.

"His name's Wilson." Guy tweaked his head low and to the side. "And he probably won't be very happy to see me."

The truck's engine sputtered for a moment and then revved when Guy stepped on the gas pedal. He sat up and shot me a glowing smile, proud of his accomplishment. Despite my heartache, I laughed at his boyish behavior.

"And I assume the vampire killers teach you how to hotwire cars in their basic training program?"

"Yes." He glanced at me, amused by my question. "I can get myself out of almost any situation."

"Except for being drained by a vampire?" I smirked at him, rubbing away the moisture from my eyes.

For a moment he looked offended, like I'd cut his ego down a notch or two. But then that same slate-grey stare took me in, confident and un-trying. "That was an unusual circumstance."

"Right." I giggled. I was still astounded I'd actually saved his life a couple of nights before. Me, an eighteen-year-old girl, had saved the life of a buff military captain. Things could not get any stranger had I sprouted wings

and flew into the sky.

Guy jammed the stick shift into first gear and sped us off into the night, traveling north-west on highway 80. I stared out the back window for a long time watching the little lights of my town disappear in the distance. I tried to ignore the dull ache in my gut at leaving my home, my family. I brushed away the pain and sighed, turning forward in my seat.

"Where does this Wilson live anyway?" I messed with my hair, hitching myself up to look in the rearview mirror. The breeze from the cracked window billowed my new, thick mane.

Guy shot me a sideways glance. "About an hour away, near Tucson. He's out of city limits, though. A reclusive place."

Curiosity got the best of me and I sat back down. "Why won't he be happy to see you?"

"We had an agreement. And I'm about to break it."

We whipped down the desert freeway and I wondered what he meant. But I kept it to myself, figuring I'd find out soon enough.

Before long, we pulled onto a long, bumpy dirt road, my teeth chattering together from the jolts. We must've driven past at least thirty acres of barren land up the long drive before arriving at our destination.

It was a normal enough house, like the ones I was used to seeing in the desert— ranch style with long, flat roofs, white-washed brick and red archways hugging the windows and doors. But this one was unkempt and crumbling, like there hadn't been any upkeep on it for at least fifty years. We cruised up and around a circular dirt drive that boasted an out-of-order fountain in the center— a sad-looking angel, distorted by years of hot, harsh weather. We pulled up to the front door which had a rose-pink patina, hidden behind a wrought-iron security door.

Guy glanced my way. "Let me do the talking."

I tried not to roll my eyes at his insistence.

He jumped out and opened my door for me, guiding me out with a soft touch that sent shivers down my spine. A line of fire traveled from his fingers to a place deep in my belly and I exhaled, trying to ignore the effect he had on me.

I turned to the door surprised at the appearance of the man who peered out at us though the wrought iron. He flashed Guy a most displeased look before opening the security door.

The man, or vampire rather —which I could detect from that unmistakable scent of banana pudding— was of average stature, if not a bit lanky. He had average features and average brown hair. He looked to be in his late twenties. His dark eyes glistened as they would in youth but he was a lot older than his appearance let on, his wisdom palpable and thick. His clothes reminded me of those my grandfather used to wear— brown knit pants, a pink button-up short-sleeved shirt, and a bolo tie holding the collar together, its two braided chords hanging down from a silver broach. His attire was an odd

match to his youthful look, and he studied us suspiciously. I assumed him to be Wilson.

"What the hell are you doing here?" His face turned down in a scowl. "We had an agreement."

"I know." Guy stuffed his hands in his pockets. "But we need your help."

Wilson turned his attention to me, giving me a long sweeping gaze. "You have a Newborn, I see." Guy nodded in agreement and the vampire sighed. "Anyone follow you?"

Guy shook his head.

"Tracking devices?"

"Smashed."

Wilson's head scanned back and forth across the cactus-filled property as if someone might be watching us, but there was nothing for miles. He seemed appeased and nodded. "Come in. Quickly now." I followed Guy into the house.

Behind us, the strange man shut the door and latched at least ten bolts and locks, like he was securing Fort Knox or something. I took a step forward, but my feet crunched beneath me. I looked down to see old Spanish tile cracking beneath my feet. I could tell it had once been beautiful, with yellow and brown painted designs, running one into the next, creating a scroll-like pattern across the floor. Low, wood-beamed ceilings hung over us, the thick planks rotting with age.

We sat down on a vintage sofa across from a rounded brick fireplace, the flames giving off the only light in the dark room. Wilson sat across from us in a dark leather recliner and leaned back, studying us both. He cleared his throat, focusing on Guy. "I imagine you are in some trouble, having a live vampire in your company."

Clearly afflicted, Guy raked a hand through his hair, the glow of the fire highlighting the hard planes of his face.

"She wasn't yet a vampire when I found her."

"Where is her maker?" Wilson asked but Guy just shrugged.

"Hmmm." Wilson considered me before standing. "My stock of human blood hasn't been replenished in a while. Would goat's blood do alright?"

Relief gushed through me that I would not have to drink human blood. "Yes, thank you."

He turned to Guy. "Water?"

Guy adjusted himself on the worn damask sofa. "Sure."

Once we had our 'refreshments,' Wilson sat again and leaned toward Guy. "Am I correct in assuming you two had something to do with the blood bank robbery?"

Guy and I caught each other's glance. He nodded slowly.

Wilson grunted. "Enlighten me. How did you manage to run off with a Newborn vampire?"

"First of all…" Guy clenched his jaw, seemingly irritated. "She wasn't a

vampire when I found her. And secondly, that's not the point. But to answer your question, the coven at the Bisbee warehouse was where I found her. It has been eradicated."

Wilson leaned back, his chair creaking. "Yes. I saw." He brought his glass to his lips and sipped the dark liquid, unaffected by the information. He sat the glass down on a narrow coffee table and glared at Guy. "What is it you want from me?"

The wind gusted outside and shook the old windows near the fire place. Guy shifted his gaze to Wilson. "I need you to help us find a safe haven for her. Somewhere she can learn to be what she is without danger."

It annoyed me the way Guy spoke about me, as though I weren't sitting right there. Like a child. I felt like an abandoned, vampire-orphan. But I supposed that's exactly what I was…

"There has to be some place I can take her where she will be accepted," Guy continued, as if trying to convince the old vampire of our worth. "Somewhere she can be taught by others like her. Otherwise, she doesn't have a chance of survival."

Wilson chuckled. "So *you* — Captain Stone of the FUSE army— are asking *me* to reveal the location of the most secret community of Unfortunates?" He picked up his glass again and paused with it at his lips. "I don't think so."

Guy huffed. "This has nothing to do with me or FUSE. It's about Faith." Guy gestured to me and I resisted the urge to make a face at his use of my new nickname.

Wilson sipped his goat's blood, his focus shifting to me. I straightened in my chair, my stomach twisting nervously under his scrutinizing gaze. A grin of amusement planted itself on the older man's lips. "So, Faith the vampire, is it?"

"It's Ruby actually." I tangled my fingers together.

Wilson finished his blood in one long pull and set the glass back down. The light from the flames danced its glow off his brown hair, giving it an auburn sheen. His dark eyes slid to Guy. "Even if I did believe you, why would you think I'd know the location? I don't consort with the others anymore. You know as well as I do, I quit that a long time ago. I like my life here. Alone."

Guy smiled wryly. "You can't fool me. You're the smartest vampire on the continent and are always aware of what's going on. And you owe me one." He lowered his voice, almost threateningly. "Plus, I could turn you in at the drop of a hat."

Wilson returned Guy's wry smile, but the expression seemed more at home on his face. "I know better. You wouldn't risk turning me in now that you are in cahoots with a Newborn. I'm sorry. I cannot help you."

"That's too bad." Guy reached into his pack and produced a bag of blood. He held it up for Wilson to see. "I brought this for you. But I guess

human blood must be unappealing now when you're used to feeding from chickens and goats."

Wilson frowned and considered the blood in Guy's hand. He sighed in resignation and snatched it away. Guy smiled and I took it as an unspoken agreement of some sort.

"If you found her the way you did," Wilson rolled the bag between his fingers as if it was smooth gold, "It's likely her maker is dead."

His words caused a slight surge of disappointment to flush through me. If my maker was dead, I would never find out who they were or why they'd turned me —something I desperately wanted to know. To think that I'd never learn who made me boiled my cold blood. But the angry thought fled once Wilson continued speaking.

"She would need some training before she could be integrated with the others or she wouldn't stand a chance."

Guy nodded, his eyes anxious. "Can you help?"

Wilson made an irritated sound and rose from his seat. He started for a dark hallway at the back of the house but stopped to look over his shoulder. "I haven't had company in years, so excuse the dust." He disappeared through the doorway and shouted back at us. "Well, are you coming?"

Guy and I exchanged pleased glances and jumped up. We followed the old vampire through the dark hallway and into a back bedroom. An old chandelier flickered above our heads, revealing the contents of the room. An eclectic mixture of styles made up the furniture and random stuff cluttered the floor. The walls had gouges where the red adobe brick showed through the white paint.

"This will be your room for the next week." Wilson swept his arm in a round gesture.

Guy frowned. "We don't have that much time."

Wilson turned to us, his eyebrows drawn close together in disbelief. "A week in itself is barely enough to teach Ruby some control. It would take months to fully train her to where she even stood a chance."

"I've got four days, max, before I'm needed back at headquarters." Guy absentmindedly picked at a spot on the wall. "And I don't suppose *you'd* be willing to escort her to her new coven?"

Wilson didn't answer. Apparently, the vampire never left his house.

"I thought so." Guy dropped his arm to his side and leaning nonchalantly against the bricks. He glanced at me, his expression almost playful in a way, teasing my body with his eyes. I swear, every time the man looked at me like that, my insides nearly melted from warm pleasure. My face flushed hot at his gaze, but as soon as it had come, Guy's playful look fled. He turned to Wilson, serious and stern, yet again. "Four days, and no longer."

"I'll do what I can," Wilson replied with a shrug. "But there's no guarantee. And we must start tonight."

Guy nodded and threw our stuff on the floor amidst a pile of accumulated

furnishings and cluttered knick-knacks. The musty smell tickled my nose.

"The guest bathroom is to your left. And I'll hang up some fresh towels." Wilson smiled at me, although a smile on him looked more like a grimace. "Take a few minutes to get settled in and then we'll get started."

"Okay," I agreed. The old vampire left, shutting the door behind him.

"So this is it?" I asked, not expecting an answer. "I'm officially a vampire in training?" A laugh bubbled from my mouth at the bizarre situation.

Guy shot me a flinty glance, back in war mode I guessed. "You'd better get cleaned up. This is going to be a long night."

With that, I ambled to the bathroom, trying not to roll my eyes at Guy's intolerance for anything other than business. It was like the minute he caught himself having fun, he turned it off like a switch. Other than the night I'd transformed, the night he'd opened up to me about his past, I'd only seen glimpses of emotion from him. And now he was back in robot status, cold and abrupt. *Great*.

But despite his cold manner, I was still warmed by his presence. He was the only thing I had to cling to in this new and strange world and I didn't want to let him go. My stomach twisted at the thought of having to separate from him in just a few days. It was terrifying. I stepped into the shower and turned on the warm water. I let it cascade over my head and body, the warmth soothing my cool flesh. With every pass of the sudsy washcloth, I felt as though I was washing away my past, letting it disappear down the drain. If only it could wash away my fear, too.

TWENTY-ONE: GUY

To say I was relieved to find Ruby was an understatement. And though having her back in my care alleviated my worry, I still couldn't help but feel sorry for her. The way she'd collapsed against the sidewalk in front of her childhood home, everything lost, killed me inside. She was like a mountain caving in on itself, the strength of her weakened by one small crack. A crack in her heart, the rocks tumbling to the ground, crashing her spirit.

I'd let her cry against my chest and held her in my arms. I didn't want to admit it, but I cared for her and didn't want to see her hurting. I wanted to do something, *anything*, to help ease her pain. But I knew she was strong and would overcome.

This was just the beginning for Ruby and she had an eternal life ahead of her, endless possibilities. In all honesty, it was something I'd always loathed about vampires; it was inhuman to live so long. But now, I wanted that for her. I wanted her to find her happiness and have the kind of life I never could. She'd seen her share of misery, but now… now she had another chance. She had something special that no human could ever know.

But the one thing *I* had now, was a bond to her. A bond that would last the rest of my life. I would forever be able to feel her and read her moods. And despite our distance, whether small or great, I would always know she was there in the back of my mind. A yearning I would never be able to satisfy, an unsated hunger. I could feel it there now, strong as ever. Not only did I need to be near her, but I felt compelled to protect her. But once I handed her over, after her training, I wouldn't be able to do that anymore. The bittersweet thought fled my mind and I found myself standing in the living room of my allied enemy. Wilson De LeBlanc.

Wilson was a vampire I had crossed paths with on many occasions and our relationship was a bit shaky, to say the least. I was treading thin ice even coming to him. But did I have any other choice?

"*You*," he seethed, glaring daggers in my direction. He spun away from me and crossed the room.

Though possessing the appearance of a young man, Wilson was old. At least a century and a half, from my recollection. He thumbed through a shelf of books and pulled one out, pressing it between his hands. The firelight highlighted his narrow form and his bolo tie hung loose around his neck. His

eyes flicked up from the book. “Have you completely lost your mind?”

I released an exasperated breath, frustrated. The vampire and I had never seen eye to eye. Our past was too complicated. My jaw clenched. “What would you have had me do? Kill her? She was just a girl.”

His brown eyes lighted on mine. “A girl infected with vampirism.”

I shook my head with annoyance. Yes, she’d been infected, but it still didn’t change that she’d been human when I found her. I was glad Ruby was out of earshot for this conversation. Wilson and I had waited until she went to shower to air out our differences.

“Have you learned nothing?” He paced with the book in hand. “I would have thought by now, you’d gained some bit of knowledge. To let nature run its course. Not to interfere with things beyond your control.”

Heat rushed to my face at his degrading tone. Of all people, he should be the one to lecture me on morals? I held back a scoff.

“And you’re one to talk about interfering? Ha.” I scrubbed my face with my hands in disbelief and then glanced back up. “Wilson De LeBlanc, great vampire dignitary. Legion leader and highly respected member of the community. That’s what you were, wasn’t it? But now? What do the Unfortunates think of when your name’s mentioned? It sure as hell isn’t respect. They’d give anything to have you in their grasp and fry you in the sun.”

Wilson’s eyes flashed with anger. Good, he finally got it. Neither one of us were perfect. That’s how we had come together in the first place, years ago. Our mistakes were our bond. He slammed his book down on the coffee table and glared up at me. His fangs descended, sharp white points from beneath his lip.

“Listen here, boy. I did not ask you to come here. I did not ask to babysit a Newborn. But that’s what you have brought me, isn’t it? Trouble in the form of a Newborn vampire girl… lovely as she is.”

He reached down and grabbed the bag of blood I’d bribed him with earlier. He shook it in his hand. “I do not need your offerings. And I sure as hell don’t need to get caught up in your messes once again.”

My chest tightened with anger, my shoulders so tense they ached. How could he make me out to be the bad guy? I wanted to shake him. I wanted to walk right up to him and shake the crap out of his vampire body. Instead I pointed a finger.

“*You*.” I clenched my teeth, trying to bite back my bitter rage. “You were the one who involved yourself in *my mess* before. I never asked you to help me. You found me, remember?” I could see Wilson’s anger flaring once more, but I continued. He knew the truth as well as I did. “And when you got into trouble, who was the one to help you?” I let a moment of silence pass, but Wilson said nothing. *Exactly*. “I was the one to help you out of FUSE. I was the one who helped you avoid permanent death. I was the one to set you up here in the middle of nowhere, where no one would find you.”

Wilson threw down the bag of blood and squared his shoulders. His brown eyes blazed with impotence. “I could rip out your throat right here, right now, Guy Stone.”

“Yes,” I agreed wickedly. “But you won’t.”

Our gazes met, chests rising and falling with heated breath. I would not back down. I would not let his self-righteous manner push me away. Not when Ruby needed me. Needed *him*. I stared him down before he finally looked away and sighed. The old vampire sank into his recliner once again and stared into the flames, resigned.

“You were but a boy when I found you,” he said softly. “Hardly able to grow a hair on your chin. You were a mess. And I thought I was doing the right thing by taking you there to find Lily. I thought I could right a wrong.”

I softened at his sadness, knowing he’d meant well. I realized what he had gone through, but I’d never given it much credit until now. He was a vampire after all.

“But I wasn’t you.” I took a step forward. “And nothing you could’ve done would’ve brought Nora back.”

Wilson shook his head at his former love’s name. He looked down at his brown boots, heartache written all over his face. “I am aware of that now. And that’s what I fear *you’ve* done, boy. Let your past guide you in this decision. Let’s just hope the Newborn will be accepted, or this could all come back to slap you in the face.”

I sat on the sofa next to him and ran my fingers through my hair, my anger fleeting. He was entirely right. There was no guarantee my plan would work the way I hoped. But I had to try.

“There’s no going back now, Wilson. I need your help.” I strained to say the next word, but finally let it fall from my lips. “Please.”

He slid his gaze to me, studying me intently. “I already said I would help you. But I cannot promise it will work.”

“Thank you,” I said, placated. Wilson stood and stared down at me sternly.

“But after this, I want things to go back to normal. You are never to step foot on my property again. Never again mention my name. Is that clear?”

I sighed with relief. And though I was not sure my plan would work, I had to hope it would. Ruby’s life, not to mention my own, depended on it.

“Never again,” I answered.

TWENTY-TWO: RUBY

I wasn't sure what to make of Wilson the vampire. Aside from the beast I'd killed in front of the Mission, he was the first vampire I'd ever met. I guess I'd been expecting someone different. Maybe someone with black hair that came to a sharp point in the front like Count Dracula. Or maybe someone wearing a swooping silken cloak like in an old black and white movie. Heck, I didn't know what I'd expected, but it sure wasn't a twenty-something year old boy wearing grandpa clothes, like he'd never gotten past the nineteen fifties. He was nerdy-unique in his own way and I could tell he was very smart. His young face belied how old he really was, but his dark eyes spoke of wisdom and maturity.

He'd seemed nice enough, I guess, but I could definitely sense the tension between Guy and him. I could see it in their body language. And Guy had never told me about Wilson, always avoiding my questions. I wondered what had happened between them to cause such strife, but it was not the time to dig up the unwanted past. It was time to prepare me for the future. One that, in all honesty, scared the crap out of me.

I, Ruby Carter, Newborn vampire, would be living amongst vampires, werewolves, and witches in the very near future. My body shuddered in trepidation. "Now, retract your fangs." Wilson's voice snapped me back to my training.

I let my swirling thoughts flee and focused on my mouth. The tips of my pointed teeth touched my bottom lip. They were sharp, *very* sharp, and if I wasn't careful, I could easily kill someone— not to mention do some serious damage to myself. I squinted with concentration and tried to retract them, but nothing happened. I sighed with frustration.

Wilson paced back and forth beneath the glow of a pale yellow spotlight that clung to the edge of an old shed, his corded bolo tie swaying with the motion. The sky was pitch black, no stars to be seen. Even the moon had gone into hiding this night.

We stood in his back yard— a sizable clearing of dirt before a huge expanse of desert. A coyote howled in the distance.

"There will be times you need to appear human." Wilson gazed out into the night as if listening to something I couldn't hear. "It will be the difference between life and death."

“But aren’t I already dead?” I still didn’t understand exactly what vampirism was and how it worked. All I knew was my human-self had died, or *almost* died rather, not quite sure which, and I’d been reborn as this creature.

“You are an Unfortunate Soul, though I despise the term,” Wilson stated with distaste, turning back to me. “That means you are no longer human. But just because you have immortality does not mean you cannot be killed.”

My stomach cringed in dark understanding of his words, but Wilson tapped me on the forehead and I creased my brows at the invasive touch.

“A quick shot to the head with a silver bullet, or even an old-fashioned wooden stake to the heart would do the trick. I’ve even heard FUSE is working with some scientists to create a new way to kill vampires using UV rays.”

“Jeez,” I replied. “I’ll make sure to wear my sunblock.”

Wilson spiked a brow at my joke, and I made a mental note to steer clear of the bad one-liners from now on. He cleared his throat and continued.

“Now, listen. It’s all about control. Close your eyes and breathe deeply. Take every thought, emotion, and memory and combine them together in a small, tight box. Then take that box and banish it from your mind, leaving a blank slate. Let nothing else cross your mind.”

I nodded and inhaled deeply, closing my eyes. A light breeze brushed the stray hairs from my face, relaxing me.

“You will focus all of your energy into your fangs.” he coached.

Calming myself, I let the beat of my heart slow. My blood coursed through my veins, reaching every muscle and nerve in my body. I was highly aware of myself standing there, so small in the wide-open desert. My body was more than it seemed. It was the same as before, but not. I was stronger and faster, with inhuman abilities. I was no longer human. I was a vampire.

“Clear your mind. I can tell you are thinking,” Wilson said.

A stab of embarrassment crossed me, as though he knew what I was thinking. But I shook my head and cleared my mind again, focusing on the darkness. Feeling the cool breeze on my skin, I focused on the thoughts and memories flooding my mind. I mentally balled them together, compacting them into a little box. I imagined that box disappearing again, leaving my mind clear. I hung suspended in oblivion. Nothing surrounding me, as if I were floating.

Once confident enough, I directed my mind toward my fangs and they retracted sharply. My eyes flew open and I gasped.

“Good job, Ruby! Good job, indeed!” Wilson’s eyes twinkled.

I reached up and touched the smoothness of my teeth, two rows of perfect white pearls. I smiled, proud of my accomplishment, small as it may be. I just might be able to get the hang of this whole being-a-vampire thing after all.

Wilson patted me on the back encouragingly. Smiling, I turned and

stumbled when I saw Guy watching us from inside the house. He stood at the sliding glass door, his strong form still, his expression unreadable. Our gazes locked and my heart tugged with emotion.

Wilson noticed the silent exchange, but went on as though he hadn't. "Now I would like to test your speed. See the saguaro cactus over there? The tall one with two arms?"

I cast one last glance toward my savior, but found him gone from the door. I shifted my gaze into the distance, straining to see the cactus, but saw only darkness. I frowned at my failure and sighed.

"I'm sorry, Wilson." Ashamed, I looked down at my feet. "I guess I'm not very good at this."

Wilson turned to me and put both hands on my shoulders. "Look at me."

I raised my gaze to his dark brown eyes, almost black, but full of compassion.

"You *are* good at this. And you will be great soon enough, I can tell. The progress I've seen from you tonight takes weeks, months even, for most Newborns to achieve. I'm quite blown away. I've never seen such strength and stamina. It's as if you were never meant to be human. Like you were meant to be a vampire, all along."

I couldn't stop the blush from spreading to my cheeks. I also couldn't help but find it bizarre that I received a sense of satisfaction from being told I was a good vampire. Like a dog retrieving his master's ball.

"Basically," Wilson said, "Vision is one of the easiest of senses to control. It's leonine. Imagine your pupils narrowing, which will drive your vision further. Okay? Let's give it a try."

He turned me to face north, the spotlight's yellow glow ending only a few feet out. The rest of the desert lay in darkness. I inhaled through my nose and focused my sight. I imagined my vision narrowing, reaching out into the distance, past the light. And instantly, as though a pair of binoculars had been placed in front of my eyes, my vision tunneled and elongated, projecting my sight to the lone saguaro cactus.

"I see it!" I exclaimed. I found it funny how excited I was to stare at a cactus. But I was enthralled, nonetheless.

Wilson adjusted his tie. "Good. Now run there and back, fast as you can. Ready?"

I nodded and Wilson glanced down at his watch.

"Go!"

With inhuman speed, I whizzed to the cactus and back in the blink of an eye, the stealthy motion exhilarating me. My feet had been so fast; it was like they'd hardly touched the ground. A cloud of dust billowed under the yellow light in my wake. I studied Wilson's expression as he checked my time.

"Well, by God," he said, highly amused. "You are damn fast, little lady. And if I'm right, I do believe you are the fastest vampire on record so far."

"Really?" My heart swelled. I tried to stifle the goofy grin plastered to

my lips, but couldn't. Me? The fastest vampire on record? It was crazy. I'd never been very athletic in life and the fact that I could now fly like the wind was intoxicating.

Wilson laughed heartily. "Yes, darling. Yes. The legion is going to roll over in their caskets when they see what you can do!"

"The legion?" I asked, suddenly wary.

Wilson glanced up at me. "Just like humans, vampires are organized creatures. There's a whole political system in place. The legion is the highest point of government, dealing with all factions of the undead. They have their own soldiers, scouts, guards. Amongst many other duties."

"Oh." I wrinkled my nose. I didn't like the idea of being in a vampire militia or anything of the sort.

"But that's beside the point." Wilson waved a dismissive hand. "It's obvious that we don't need to work on your vampire skills as much as we need to work on your *human* skills."

"Human skills?" I asked, confused. A loose strand of my hair whipped free and stuck to my lip.

Wilson shifted his stance. "Yes, Ruby. Oddly enough, the key to being a good vampire is being able to replicate a human. If you find yourself surrounded by humans, your best defense is to blend in, be one of them."

I nodded, pulling the hair from my mouth. I was completely immersed in the lesson. I'd been a human for so long that it was strange having to relearn how to be one. Was it even possible?

Wilson gestured out into the desert with his chin. "Now I want you to repeat your run to the cactus and back. But this time, run like a human. Jog, even. Slowly."

I nodded. "Sounds easy enough."

Wilson checked his watch again. "Okay. Go."

I thought back to a few short days ago, before I'd been turned. I recalled how it was to be human. I started my legs in a trot and casually ran to the cactus and back.

Wilson considered the cloud of dust rising into the night air from under the spotlight and frowned.

"Still faster than any vampire I know," he said, studying me.

I flinched in surprise. "But I went so slowly. It felt like it took me forever."

"Listen," Wilson spiked a brow. "Why don't we call it a night? You've worked extremely hard and I've seen a lot of progress. Now that I have an idea of what I'm working with, I can mold tomorrow night's lessons to fit your needs. I do have to say though, that you are one of a kind. I'd even go as far as to say you're a different kind of vampire. Something beyond the norm. Something never seen before."

I smiled at his —what was it, a compliment? Anyway, I smiled and let him guide me into the house, all the while trying to figure out how to seem

more human again. This was going to be an interesting journey, for sure.

TWENTY-THREE: RUBY

Exhausted, I leaned on the kitchen counter and took a sip of goat's blood from my glass. I winced in gross expectation, but to my surprise, didn't gag. My pallet was getting more accustomed to the thick red syrup, and in all honesty, it made me feel better. I didn't know what I was going to do when time came for human blood— when it was my only option. I still didn't understand why I was so opposed to it. Whether for moral reasons or that it just didn't appeal to my taste —I hated the stuff.

I gazed out Wilson's kitchen window, past a threadbare curtain. We'd been training for hours and, to my relief, were forced to stop because of our limitations. The sun was close to rising and I would need to go to sleep soon. I reached up to rub the sore muscles in my arm but felt a tingle of awareness on my neck, a presence. I knew who it was without even having to turn around.

"Good job out there tonight." Guy's voice rippled through me like soft thunder. I turned slowly, trying to pace my movements as Wilson had taught me.

I'll admit it; I wasn't the most delicate of vampires. I recalled the doors, gates, fences, and chains I'd busted through in the past few days, before I knew my own strength. But I was getting better.

"Thank you," I said, pleased by his encouragement.

Dark circles shadowed Guy's eyes. He hadn't been sleeping as much as he should. Our gazes locked, rushing a river of nerves through me. How was it that this man made me feel this way? I sighed, ignoring the thought and Guy took a step forward.

"Wilson says you're already adjusting to your new body. Your movements are even more… graceful."

Ironically, just as the words left his mouth, I thunked my cup down on the counter, the contents sloshing out to make a mess on my face. I froze, blood dripping from my nose… gracefully.

We fell silent for a moment before bursting into laughter. I laughed so hard, my belly ached.

"Who am I kidding, Faith?" Guy chuckled as he eyed me up and down. "You're the world's clumsiest vampire." I looked at him with a playfully pouty lip. "But you'll get there. It will just take time."

Our amusement subsided when Guy grabbed a towel and gently wiped

my nose and chin, his hand brushing the side of my face. Sparks ignited within me at his touch and I tried to resist being sucked into his slate grey stare, but couldn't help it. We stood there silently in the kitchen, eyes locked, an unseen electricity buzzing between us. All I wanted to do was crush him in my arms and hold him forever. But after a moment— or ten— he jerked his hand away and diverted his eyes. I kneaded my hands together nervously.

"I guess it's time for bed," he reasoned.

I turned away, embarrassed. "I guess so."

We both knew we'd be sleeping in the same room again like the last couple of days. But this time was different, more awkward. Maybe because of the feelings I was developing for Guy. I sensed he might be returning those feelings, as well.

"You take the bed," he suggested. "I'll make a pallet on the floor."

Wilson had already retired to his room and I followed Guy through the dark house and down the back hall. We entered the room and he flicked on the lamp. I studied his face, his eyes dull and tired. Guy had been keeping the same schedule as me, staying up all night and sleeping during the day, though not very well I presumed. It warmed my heart to think of the sacrifices he'd made for me and I couldn't hold back my gratitude.

"I know I've said it before…" I averted my eyes from his. "But thank you." He shoved a pile of empty picture frames to the side wall. He didn't respond, continuing to shuffle furniture and clutter aside to make a clear spot for himself on the floor.

"I can't begin to understand how much you've sacrificed for me." I grazed my fingers across a rough patch in the wall. "I will be forever in your debt."

Guy unfurled a rolled-up mat and laid it flat on the stone floor. His face took on a look of appreciation at hearing my words but it quickly faded into coldness. The same distant look I'd seen on him before.

"I would've done it for anyone."

My heart sank, but I figured since I'd brought up the subject in the first place, I had to say something.

"Of course."

His comment stung. I'd started to think he liked me, or at least felt for me in some way. But when he spoke like that, it made me feel cold and alone again. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe his actions were just some self-indulgent, moralistic duty he had to uphold because of what had happened to his former love. From what I'd gathered, he had a lot of ghosts in his closet and I couldn't blame him for being distant. But I still didn't like it.

Without changing clothes, as I had nothing to change into, I climbed into the twin bed and pulled the quilt over my body. I glanced up to notice tin foil had been layered on the insides of all the windows to block out the sun. The silver of it glittered through the wooden blinds.

Guy turned off the lamp and crawled onto his mat. Within seconds, his

breathing fell soft, sleep taking him quickly. I rolled onto my side and stared blankly into the darkness. My mind spun in circles, trying to grasp what my life would be like once I was taken to the other vampires.

Guy moaned in his sleep and I curled up into a ball. For the past three days— my entire life as a vampire— I'd depended on this man for my safety. I'd depended on him as a companion. I'd depended on him for everything, really. And that connection had brought us closer together. But I couldn't let my feelings have their way with me. I needed to stay strong, like he was. I could not let myself get too attached to Guy. He was a human after all and I was an Unfortunate Soul.

Sleep quickly pulled at my fatigued body, my mind fading away from the conflicted thoughts. Yet again, I found myself slammed into a memory, the recollections of past days growing clearer each time they returned…

Screaming pierced my ears, my own voice pitching high as I lost control of the vehicle. Leaving the smooth road, the car bucked and heaved, tossing my body back and forth. Bouncing headlights illuminated a line of thick trees. Coming closer… closer.

My heart thundered. My fingers wrapped tight around the wheel, constricting the blood flow from my heart to my hands, fingers numb. Water washed across the windshield, bleeding mixed colors across the glass like spilled paint. I couldn't see. My chest tightened, panic stricken. My foot slammed the brakes to no avail and the car swerved to and fro, cracking and grinding over rocky terrain. My breath hitched. I closed my eyes.

Impact.

Suddenly, my breath was knocked from my lungs. Metal crunched like breaking bones and glass shattered like splintered ice. Pain erupted through my body.

And just before everything faded to black, I recalled wondering if that would be the moment I met my death. The moment I met my maker…

TWENTY-FOUR: GUY

I rose from my pallet on the floor and quietly tidied my bedding. A pang of sorrow wedged itself into my heart like an arrow when I glanced down at Ruby's sleeping form, for I knew this would be the last time I saw her that way. It was late afternoon and, in theory, she shouldn't wake until after sunset. I would have a few hours to go into town and gather some supplies for our trip. Our time was growing short and I needed to make sure everything was in place. I'd come too far to cover my tracks and I couldn't afford any hiccups.

I found Wilson awake in the living room, reading a book. All of the shades were drawn and, except for a couple of burning candles, the house was shrouded in darkness. I wondered if the vampire ever slept.

I stepped forward. "I'm heading into town. I need to get some supplies for the trip."

Wilson didn't flinch or even look up but kept his eyes firmly on the book. "Are you sure that is wise?"

Here we go again. I raised an annoyed brow.

"Listen. I've destroyed my tracker and, as far as I know, none of my men are stationed here in Tucson. It won't be a problem." One long moment passed while I stood there, just staring at him. Sometimes I think he did it to get the better of my patience. But I waited quietly for a response.

"I have everything one would need to survive," he explained, keeping his eyes on the page. "You're welcome to it. There's no need to go out."

One of the candles sputtered from a warm draft, but the flame held strong. I folded my arms over my chest. "Unless you have a closet full of ladies clothes, I need to go into town. At some point Ruby will have to change. We can't have her showing up at the coven looking like a tourist."

Wilson shrugged one shoulder, but still did not look up. "Suit yourself. But be fast. I don't like this coming and going stuff. It's not safe."

I said nothing but bent over in an overly dramatic bow. Wilson eyed me sideways as I backed away in mocking subservience to my king. He shook his head, annoyed, and I smiled before letting myself out the front door. There was no better satisfaction than pissing off the old vampire.

I revved the engine of the truck I'd 'borrowed,' satisfied when it roared to life. I sped west toward the afternoon sun and flipped down the visor to

shade my eyes. Yes, it was true Ruby would need some new clothes but I'd left out the part about having another matter to attend. If Ruby had done anything for me, it was to show me that life was short and anything could happen. And I had some loose ends that needed tying up.

I raced up the ramp, merging onto the freeway toward Sierra Vista. My mind wandered, sinking me into a time I'd tried to forget. A time in my life that almost broke me…

A blaring car horn jolted me away from my reverie and back to reality. I hadn't even realized that I'd been zoning out. Exhaling loudly, I corrected the wheel and waved out the window, apologizing for my lack of attention. Apparently, I'd swerved into the other lane. *Get it together*. I rubbed my eyes with the palm of my hand. I hadn't been sleeping but a few hours a day and it was starting to get to me.

Before long, I took the exit that would lead me to my past, a past I didn't want to dredge up. But it was time and I needed to go there. Not so much for Lily, but for myself. Trepidation crawled up my spine as I parked and made my way into the small cemetery.

I paced the headstones, my gaze flickering from one to the next, my heart thudding quickly in my chest. The grey sky hung with low clouds and the wind blustered around me. A monsoon was moving in. The few visitors in the cemetery hustled away in lieu of the oncoming storm, leaving me alone in my search. I sucked in a deep breath, wondering what Lily had been thinking before she died. I wondered if she blamed me for her death.

I came upon the grave I'd been searching for. It was small and simple. Nothing fancy, no shiny marble. No ornate details like the larger ones surrounding it. Just a squared slab of stone, the name Lily Brighton carved in plain letters. It sat beneath a large oak, whose wispy limbs curled into the sky. A bouquet of dead roses rested against the stone. Roses from someone that loved her and was still hurting to this day because she was gone.

I sank to my knees and sadly brushed her name with my fingers. "Lily," I whispered.

After finding her dead a couple years ago, I'd never once come to her gravesite. Nor her funeral. The fear and pain had kept me away. FUSE had taken care of all the details with a cover story. Even General Brandt had urged me to go, to grieve. But at the time, I couldn't allow myself to re-live the trauma of losing her. It'd been my fault for not searching long enough, hard enough. It was my fault for letting her into my life in the first place. I was the reason she'd died.

I found myself speaking to Lily's tombstone as though she could hear me, my voice gravelly with regret.

"I never should have let you go out there on your own. I should've stayed with you. Protected you." Dry leaves fluttered past my legs in the breeze as if in response. I swallowed hard. "I'm sorry."

My stomach fell open inside, a burn traveling to the bottom of my feet.

An ache I'd never allowed myself to feel before now. I'd always repressed my feelings, never mourning the way I should have. And now that I allowed the emotions to come forth, my entire body trembled with the magnitude of years of pain. I shivered unintentionally.

"And now I don't know what to do." I caressed one of the dry rose petals that had fallen away. It crumbled beneath my fingers. "I've intervened in someone else's life. Their death. I'm afraid I've made a mistake. But I think… I think I love her."

For the first time in as long as I can remember a tear rolled down my cheek, dripping from my chin. The wind gusted and the large oak creaked in its wake. The bustling air brushed against the back of my neck. I'd never thought I could love again. Was it even possible? My skin rose in gooseflesh.

"Tell me," I said to the empty air. "Am I wrong in trying to help her? Should I have let her die?"

Ruby's smile entered my mind, her violet eyes glistening with warmth and her laugh tickling my senses. No, I couldn't have let her die, especially now. Now that I knew what I would've missed out on.

"I…" my throat clenched, hesitation stunting my breath. No, I needed to do this. I needed to tell her. I swallowed past the lump and started again. "For so long, I shut down. From everything and everyone. The grief over what happened to you haunted me, Lily. It changed me. I became vengeful and spiteful. I became a monster."

The smell of flowers traveled on the breeze and I inhaled the scent, wondering if I was still the monster I once was. I wondered if that is what Lily would've wanted me to become— a cold ruthless killer. Probably not.

And then it dawned on me that I *had* changed. Ruby had changed me, just as Lily had. But this time was different— like awakening from a bad dream and feeling the warmth of the sun on my skin. I wasn't a vengeful beast anymore, living for the thrill of the kill, relentlessly hunting down Unfortunates as though they were insects. I had become more human again, finally letting my wall break down. But I wondered what that meant for the life I'd pledged myself to. The one where I led men into battle against something I knew little about.

My world was turning upside down, my mind a whirlwind of questions and doubts. But despite the conflict sweeping over me like crashing waves, it didn't feel wrong to care for Ruby. It actually felt like the right thing to do.

I jerked in surprise as a black crow landed on the headstone, its beady eyes blinking down at me. The bird wasn't afraid, but studied me as if waiting for me to speak. I stilled with wonder during our silent exchange, as if it were a sign, as if Lily were speaking to me through nature. A cluster of rose petals fell away from the bouquet and danced across my knees. The bird cocked its head before flapping away. Rain began to patter against my shoulders.

I reached into my pocket and brought out the knife Lily had given me long ago. I rubbed the engraving of my last name on the handle. *Stone*. I

licked my dry lips and placed the weapon at the base of her gravestone. A peace offering. A symbol of closure. A new beginning. I touched the grave again, whispering.

"Thank you."

Though she was long gone, she'd given me the answers I needed.

And maybe I'd done right, after all. Maybe this wasn't a mistake, but a blessing in disguise. I wasn't sure what my future held now that the vampire Faith had come into my life. But I had no other choice but to help her. Help Ruby. I would find her a place with people of her own kind, where she would be safe from the likes of me.

I rose to my feet and gave the stone one last glance before turning away. I left the cemetery with a new air about me, peacefulness relaxing my body. I accepted my new outlook on life, finally letting go of Lily. Finally letting go of my past.

Now I had to go help a girl. A girl I would forever hold a bond with. Whether we were meant to be together or not, whatever the distance, I would always hold a place in my heart for Ruby. I would forever be connected to her, my beautiful vampire Faith. A gift from beyond the grave.

TWENTY-FIVE: RUBY

I sat bolt upright, gasping for air. My heart pounded in my ears and I clasped my hands to my chest in hopes to slow it down.

"Guy?" I stumbled from the bedroom, the shards of another dream finally letting go, leaving me dark and anxious inside. Sweat beaded my forehead.

My racing heart finally slowed as I padded down the hallway, reminding myself it was just another dream, another memory— one of my death. Since making no progress on the missing piece of time from my memory when awake, I was hopeful it'd come to me in sleep. But for some reason when my dreams hit the revealing point I'd been searching for— the clue to who made me this way— they stopped abruptly. It was as if something wouldn't let them pass.

I released a long breath to calm myself and called out to my savior again.

"Guy?"

I'd woken to the darkness, finding myself alone. Guy's pallet was rolled up and put to the side, his blankets folded and stacked neatly atop his pillow.

The house was dark except for a few candles and low-light lamps casting a dim glow. I plodded down the hall, passing a closed red door and a few others that were wide open. Clutter and antiques filled the rooms, but I saw no one.

"Hello?" I called out warily, but got no response. "Wilson?"

I moved through the living room and into the kitchen only to find a half-drained glass of blood and a plate with toast crumbs. On my way back down the hall, I stopped by the red door and heard soft murmuring within.

I grasped the brass doorknob carefully and opened the door a crack. An electronic blue glow beamed from the room and I heard Wilson muttering to himself inside. "Too close. Too close."

"Wilson?" I asked with hesitation. I'd never noticed this room before and I didn't want to intrude on Wilson's privacy. But curiosity got the better of me and I creaked it open a bit more.

A ferocious growl pierced my ears and I found myself slammed against the hallway, my body pinned by my neck. My heart pounded in response to Wilson's dark eyes flashing at me, his expression twisting with anger and fear. His breath heaved on my cheek and if I hadn't known better, I'd have thought he would kill me right then and there.

I opened my mouth but was unable to speak for the strain on my neck. My fangs extended and my instinct was to fight, to kill. But I reluctantly restrained myself, not wanting to hurt Wilson, wondering what the heck had happened to him.

His eyes burned with the fury of a wild beast but I saw a sudden change there. A realization. He dropped me to the ground and stumbled backward, panting.

"I… I…" he stammered, leaning against the wall. He adjusted the tie around his neck and scrubbed his forehead. "I don't know what came over me. Are… are you all right?"

I rubbed my neck, though to my amazement, felt no pain. "Yes, I'm fine." He reached out a hand and helped me from the floor, his face lined with regret.

"I'm sorry. I fear I've become a bit antsy in my old age."

Yet again, my racing heart slowed its pace, but my hands still shook with adrenaline. I took in the old vampire standing before me. He looked worn and tired, as though he'd had no sleep.

I concentrated on my fangs like Wilson had taught me the night before and to my pleasant surprise, they retracted with little effort. But pride over my accomplishment fled when I saw the relieved expression on Wilson's face and I wondered what could've caused him to act in such a way.

As though hearing my questions, Wilson laid a gentle hand on my shoulder. "I wasn't completely honest with you. I didn't leave the Unfortunate Souls willingly." He heaved out a long breath. "I escaped."

I scrunched my brows in unvoiced question.

Wilson rubbed his palms together, weighing his words. "Without going into too much detail, all I can say is that I broke the rules. I did something unforgivable by our kind."

"Did you kill someone?" I asked, my own mishap at the old mission instantly coming to mind when I'd killed the vampire.

He shook his head. "No. I did something that, in their opinion, is much worse than murder."

I opened my mouth to ask what possibly could be worse than murder but before I could speak, Wilson guided me to the red door, changing the subject.

"And that is why I live here, alone. Though I don't like to admit it, Captain Stone was the one who helped to set me up here, where I could not be found. And that's why, when I found you at the door, I panicked. I'm always on edge, fearing they will one day find me and serve me with permanent death."

I nodded, realizing there was more to Wilson than I would ever understand. I was about to ask another question when he opened the red door, revealing what looked like some sort of control center.

"On a lighter note… I have something to show you."

We entered the hidden room and I gazed around in wonder. The walls

peeled with yellowing wallpaper and were hung with security screens and old picture frames. The frames were filled with black and white portraits of people long since gone. I wondered about the picture I had of my family. I wondered if in a few short years, it too would be an antique. I gazed at the hazy black and white memories that had lost their color, their brilliance gone.

Wilson leaned over one of three desks, which was crammed with glowing computers and laptops, a tangle of wires running this way and that. Tall shelves overflowed with old books and baskets lined the floor with rolled-up maps and other furled documents. It was a strange and eclectic gathering of new and old, yet I found myself comforted by it.

"Have a seat." Wilson gestured to a rolling computer chair and I sat down, scanning the television monitors in awe.

"What is this, Wilson?"

"My office." He flashed me a dry smile, sitting down in the chair next to mine.

"Yeah." I giggled at his obvious answer. "I figured that much. But why all of the computers and television screens? What's all this stuff? What do you *do*?"

"These are the notions of an old, crazy vampire," he said, his voice raw and sleepy. He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. "Some would call me paranoid, but I like to think of myself as well-informed."

I focused on one of the screens which captured the training area from the night before. The yellow spotlight highlighted the side of the shed and the dirt below.

"You must feel pretty secure here." Astonished, I noted all of the many locations currently being recorded. "Do you have security cameras surrounding the whole property?"

"And other places around town," Wilson added with a smile. My eyebrows arched in question, and he continued. "I knew about the blood bank robbery hours before any news reporter. Why do you think that was?" It was a rhetorical question.

"Wow," I said, amazed by his expansive technology.

"I considered bringing you here tonight, anyhow." Wilson rolled his chair closer to the desk in front of us, the wheels squeaking. "Now that you're one of us, there are some things you should know." He leaned over and pointed to a spot on an old hand-drawn map lying flat on the desk, the distinct smell of vampire hitting my nose. "This is where Captain Stone will be taking you when the time comes."

I studied the lines and curves of the map, my eyes shooting wide in recognition to a place not far from my home. "That's the town of Tombstone. But why would he be taking me there? It's just an old abandoned ghost town."

"That's exactly what they want you to think." Wilson winked mischievously. "Tombstone may have been condemned and closed off to tourists years ago, but it's hardly abandoned."

I leaned in, amazed, and looked harder at the yellowed map. I thought if I looked closely enough, I might see inside the little drawings, clueing me in on the mystery of the secret city.

Wilson rubbed his hand softly over the paper. "Tombstone is the largest Southwestern hub for Unfortunate Souls, complete with its own community of Werewolves, Vampires, Witches and the like."

My mouth hung open at the new information and my mind spun like a dust devil. I'd only just now started to come to terms that vampires themselves actually existed— not to mention that I'd become one myself. But now, this? Seriously? It was a herculean concept; an entire populace of otherworldly creatures, all living amongst each other. Mind blowing.

"It's a nice little town, really," Wilson continued, breaking my train of thought. "And for the most part, it is run fairly and can be peaceful at times. Or at least it *used* to be, anyway."

I frowned, wondering what he meant by 'peaceful at times.' What happened the *rest* of the time? I didn't even want to imagine.

"Did you ever live there, Wilson?" My heart pounded with excitement and just a hint of fear.

The old vampire furrowed his brows together in a frown. He played with the edge of the map, furling and unfurling it. "Yes. In fact, I was a highly respected leader. I was head of the vampire legion until…"

He let his words trail off. What? What did he do that was so bad, forcing him to flee with his life? The suspense was killing me. I tilted my head to the side, waiting for him to finish. But to my disappointment, he waved a hand indicating his dismissal of the thought.

"No matter. When you get there, you will want to meet with a woman named Pandora. She is the head of new recruits. She will help you get settled in and find a place for you to contribute your skills."

Hmm… My skills. I had trouble envisioning a town in which vampires and werewolves worked hand in hand, contributing their *skills*. But the more I considered it, the more it seemed plausible. I mean, for all intents and purposes, we weren't that different from humans after all… Or were we?

I surveyed the security screens again, one in particular catching my eye. "Is that Tombstone, there?"

I saw the old cracked sign resembling the one I'd seen in pictures, but this one was marked 'Condemned.' The old ghost town had been open to the public at some point in the past. But sometime before I was born, there'd been a tremendous cave in from the gold mines beneath, making it uninhabitable. Most people in Southern Arizona knew the devastating story, a part of old west history.

"Yes, indeed," Wilson nodded. "I'm able to see who comes and goes but not what goes on inside the town."

I studied the screen again, but saw no movement out on the old road leading into the blocked-off town. I gaped, in awe of the old vampire and his

technology. Technology that could survey a place nearly two hours away.

Wilson froze, his eyes fixed on one of the glowing screens. I followed his line of sight to see Guy pulling up in the front drive in our 'borrowed' truck. I resisted the urge to laugh, remembering the way Guy had beamed proudly over his hotwiring skills.

"Time to lock up." Wilson shot up from his seat and shooed me out of the room, closing the red door behind us. He took a key from his pocket and locked the door.

"Ruby." He held me steady by my shoulders, his gaze serious and unrelenting. "I've shown you this in confidence, assuming you will keep my secret. You mustn't tell a soul —dead or alive— any of the information you have seen."

"Yes," I sincerely agreed. "Of course."

Wilson released me, but leaned in, the sound of his voice dark and ominous. "You must understand if I'm found out by FUSE or even the Unfortunates themselves, my home would be destroyed and I would likely be killed— not to mention all the information they could find. It could mean the end for a lot of Unfortunates. It could mean great devastation."

My guts flipped inside my stomach, the severity of Wilson's secrecy now becoming very apparent. And I liked the old vampire. I'd never do anything to harm him. "I understand, Wilson. I won't tell a soul."

Wilson ushered me out into the living room where Guy met us with armloads of shopping bags and boxes. He laid them on the ground before me.

"What's all this?" I asked.

"Yes." Wilson cocked his head to the side, unamused. "What's all this?"

Guy contemplated Wilson warily, but then diverted his attention to me. He beamed, causing a flutter in my stomach. There was something different about his smile. Was it lighter? Happier? I couldn't tell what, exactly. But I didn't care, warmth spreading through my body from beneath his gaze.

"I bought you some new clothes." He stepped forward, our bodies closer now. "I figured you'd want something different to wear when you join the others."

My heart warmed and my skin flushed. Guy never ceased to amaze me. Under his hard exterior and grim manner, he was a sensitive and caring soul. I couldn't help but grin widely. Things were definitely looking up.

"Thank you so much." I threw my arms around Guy and he flinched before finally softening into the hug. He felt so good. So good in fact, I never wanted to let go. His strong fingers gripped my back and his warm breath tickled my hair. But I forced myself to part from him, dropping to the ground to scoop up the bags and boxes.

Wilson stepped forward. "Here, let me help you with those."

"Thank you," I said as Wilson hefted a box in his arms.

"No." Guy took the box from Wilson and I shot him a surprised look. "I can help her."

I stood and backed up, considering the two men, the tension between them palpable. It was obvious that their personalities clashed.

"This is my house and if I wish to help the young lady with her things, then I should be able to do as I wish." Wilson grabbed the box away from Guy.

After a tense moment, Guy snatched the package back from Wilson and I almost laughed at the absurdity of it. But Guy frowned, obviously jealous of Wilson's attention to me.

"You weren't the one who had to skim through women's underwear while the changing room lady shot you dirty looks. I will help her."

The two men stood face to face, their postures rigid and expressions scowly.

I scrunched my brows, observing what resembled a no-blinking contest like I used to have with my friends at school, but this one even more ridiculous. The men, so ferocious and predatory in their demeanors, could've rivaled two alpha lions vying for the king-of-the-jungle position. Tension stiffened my muscles and anger bubbled up inside of me. And before I knew it, my fangs shot out in frustration.

"Seriously? Can we just stop the pissing contest already?"

Wilson and Guy gaped at me in shock and I placed my hands on my hips, tapping my foot. I gave them my best you-should-know-better look, but I'm sure it was semi-humorous with my vicious fangs out and all. But I didn't care. I couldn't stand by and watch this long-time feud continue. It was silly.

"What happened to you two that caused such a rift? Wait a minute, that's right. No one has been kind enough as to fill me in. But from what I can tell, you two need to get over it. If I didn't know any better, I'd think I was watching two schoolboys fighting to get the popular girl's attention. This is silly. Look at you two." I gestured with disgust at their impish behavior. "Guy, you are a grown man, and a Captain, no less. And Wilson. What are you? Like… like two hundred years old?"

The two men looked away ashamedly.

"And from what I hear, I could probably kick both of your asses right here and now for being so ridiculous. I think I can handle a couple of boxes." I swooped down, wrapped my arms around the parcels, and stood with them in tow. I started down the hall, the men's astonished gazes following me.

"Now, I'm going to put these in my room and then I'd like to start my training, if that's all right with you? We only have three more nights, you know."

I smirked to myself as I went down the hallway. Who said an eighteen-year-old Newborn vampire couldn't school a couple of testosterone driven males?

TWENTY-SIX: RUBY

"Crap!" I gritted my teeth in frustration, two halves of a broken spoon in each one of my hands. I'd been working on bending spoons for the better part of two hours and kept snapping them in half.

"Focus." Wilson sat across from me at the long dining room table, his hands folded in front of him. "Or *don't* focus rather. Let your power become weak. Let yourself relax. Don't think too hard. Remember how I taught you?"

I nodded.

He handed me another silver spoon. "Good. Now try to bend it. Carefully."

I exhaled and took the spoon in both of my hands, my fists wrapped around it side by side. I closed my eyes and let myself sink into my own mind. I brought all of my thoughts together, focusing on keeping them tightly bunched. I let the thoughts vanish like a flock of birds scattering from a tree. I pried my hands down, trying not to think about the task at hand but the spoon snapped regardless and I dropped the metal pieces on the table, releasing an exasperated breath.

"It's too hard."

"No," Wilson countered, his voice laced with challenge. "You're just very strong. It will take more practice."

I caught a glimpse of Guy standing at the entrance to the dining room, combing his fingers through his dark hair in thought. My stomach immediately pooled with heat and my heart fluttered. It was the strangest thing, the way he made me feel. I wasn't sure if it was my newly heightened vampire senses or if it was just what he did to me, but something was there for sure, making my legs the consistency of soggy cereal. And now, ever since he'd come back with new clothes for me, I sensed it in him, too. He had dropped his tough-guy attitude and was softer somehow, kinder. What had happened on his trip into town? Whatever it was changed him. Guy was finally being himself and I liked it. He smiled and walked away, my body blazing with a yearning heat.

Wilson continued instructing but I didn't hear what he was saying. Not only had I been working tirelessly for hours, my mind was somewhere else. I thought about Guy and his selfless act of taking me on. I thought about how he had cradled me in front of my old home and let me cry into his chest. I

wondered what made him tick. I wondered why in the world he'd saved someone like me. I knew it had been in part because of the love he'd lost, but there was something more. Something deeper he wasn't letting on to.

"Ruby? Are you listening?" I blinked from my reverie and looked at Wilson. He tilted his head to the side in question.

"Huh?" I blinked again. "Oh, yes. Sorry. You were saying something about mind over matter?"

Wilson's face softened. "Let's take a break, shall we?" He stood and went to the fridge, grabbing a packet of blood. "Has Guy mentioned bonding to you yet?"

I creased my brows. "No."

Wilson sighed and poured the blood into a tall, antique chalice. He sat down at the table and knitted his hands together awkwardly. I sensed his discomfort on the topic. "Why do I get the feeling we're about to have a birds and bees talk?"

He laughed, his pale cheeks flushing. I had the feeling this conversation was going to be just as comfortable as sitting on scalding leather seats in the middle of summer while wearing shorts. Wilson inhaled deeply before speaking.

"Bonding is something done between two consensual vampires, where they commit themselves to each other for the duration of eternity. Or until their permanent death."

I shifted in my seat with unease. I didn't understand how this was relevant to me—especially now. I'd barely just become a vampire and did not intend on committing to another blood-sucking being for all of eternity.

"Once you've been bonded," Wilson continued, his voice serious as a heart attack, "nothing can break it. You will always be aware of your mate and him of you, no matter what the distance. You will feel each other's joy and even their pain. It's a serious relationship. In history, this was only done between vampires. It was frowned upon for a vampire to take a human into bonding. And in the rare case this ever happened, and the two mates were found out, the vampire —along with the human— would be taken and killed."

And like a light flickering on in the darkness, I understood what Wilson had done to be excommunicated by his fellow vampires.

"Wait— Wilson." I gasped, in spite of myself. "You fell in love with a human?"

He stared at me impassively and, for a moment, I thought I'd been wrong. But he finally nodded, sadness lining his forehead. I felt sorry for the old vampire. How horrible for two people who cared for each other so deeply to be ripped apart so viciously.

"What happened?" I looked down at my lap. I'd finally changed from the stretch pants and tank top I'd been wearing for days. I now wore a comfortable pair of jeans and T-shirt Guy had picked up for me. I fidgeted with the hem of my shirt and looked over to see Wilson staring into space.

“You two were bonded?” I asked.

Wilson reached up and adjusted his bolo tie, the corded ropes swinging in front of his thin chest. “Yes. She was… the love of my life. I tried to ignore my feelings, but it was impossible. Consequently, I bonded myself to her.”

For a moment, I thought I saw him tear up, but Wilson looked away. “An unrequited bond is one of the most painful of situations. It’s like loving someone more than your own life and not having the love reciprocated. It’s the loneliest and most desperate feeling. Words cannot describe it.”

“Why didn’t she bond to you, Wilson? What happened?”

“We were ambushed before she was able to. I escaped but she was taken.”

“Oh, my God. I’m so sorry.”

“I could feel when they tortured her,” he continued. “I sensed her pain. But she could not feel the strength I was sending her. She was unable to sense me like I could sense her. I could not send her a signal to wait for me to rescue her. She gave in before I could find her, and she finally let go. I will never forgive myself for what happened. I robbed her of her life and it would’ve never happened had I not bonded myself to her. I put her in a dangerous predicament. It was my own fault.”

Wilson released an empty laugh and waved a hand as though banishing the memory. I took a sip of the blood as he considered me.

“I tell you this, because you need to be aware the recourse of being bonded to a human. It is against the rules.”

Just then, it dawned on me and I realized what he was insinuating. I almost choked on my drink.

“Guy and me? You think we’ve bonded?” I laughed uncomfortably. “Heck, no. I’ve only known him for a few days. And I’m pretty sure we haven’t done anything of the sort.”

Wilson spiked a dubious brow. “Are you certain?”

I looked at him but didn’t answer. I didn’t know anything about bonding and wasn’t sure exactly what it entailed.

“The reason I ask,” he continued, “is I sense something between you and Guy.”

I looked down at the table and twirled my glass on the wood. Well, he wasn’t wrong there. We’d been through so much together and I assumed any two people in a similar situation would have a connection of some sort. I ignored the fact that I had been developing feelings for Guy. Those feelings were invalid and, sadly, would never come to anything. I shrugged.

“He did save my life, though. And I, his. Maybe that has something to do with what you’re sensing.”

Wilson clasped his hands together but didn’t seem convinced. “Perhaps.”

“Wilson?” I asked.

“Yes?”

“How do you bond to someone? Like, what makes it happen?” Not like I

ever planned on it. I just figured that if I was going to live amongst a community of vampires, it might be something I'd need to know.

"Well," Wilson pushed his chair back from the table and stood. He walked to the kitchen window and looked out. "Basically, bonding is the exchange of blood from one vampire to another. And in rare cases, a human."

I frowned, and looked down at my lap. "But then, wouldn't a vampire be bonded to a human if they feed from them?" I felt like a child again, perpetually asking questions about the new world around me. But Wilson was kind and treated each question with care.

Wilson let out a breath from pursed lips as though racking his brain for information. "No. It's a little more complicated than that. A vampire seeks blood from a human for nourishment. Theoretically, there's no attachment there. Therefore, there will be no bonding. Bonding is an emotional connection combined with a physical one. And it's a conscious decision. It doesn't just happen because you've ingested someone else's blood. If that were the case, I'd be uncomfortably fond of my goats."

I burst out laughing, picturing an awkward candlelit dinner with Wilson and his goat.

"Are we talking about Wilson's love of goats?"

I'd been so immersed in the conversation that I hadn't even sensed Guy standing behind us in the doorway. His deep voice sent shivers down my spine and I spun around, my jaw nearly hitting the floor.

He leaned against the doorframe, hands shoved into loose jeans pockets. He'd always been handsome, don't get me wrong, but now he was just… sexy. He was no longer in the same ratty uniform he'd been wearing since I'd met him, but wore a tight white T-shirt and jeans. His brown hair was damp, freshly washed, and his face shaven smooth, revealing his boyish grin. Guy had always struck me as a mature soul, so stern and controlling. But in all reality, he was young, only a few years older than I was. And his youth was blatantly apparent in that moment.

Wilson curled a lip at Guy, a forced half-smile.

"Am I interrupting an important lesson?" Guy asked.

Wilson started to speak, but I jumped in before he could say a word.

"No. We were just talking." I stood from my chair and shifted my gaze between the two men.

Guy looked at the old vampire and gestured to me. "Wilson, may I steal your student away for a little while? She looks like she could use a break."

Relief washed through me and I smiled, nodding enthusiastically. I could use a break from this house. From my training. From Wilson.

Wilson grimaced, but it was not much different from his normal facial expression. He adjusted his tie but did not respond.

I stuck out my bottom lip in a pout, pleading to Wilson with my eyes. "Please? We've been at it for hours. Just a short break?"

Wilson studied Guy for one long moment, before dropping his gaze. He

sighed. “Fine.”

I giggled with joy. Ever since the night I turned, everything had been rush, rush, rush. All business. No time for anything but running and hiding. Surviving. I was still a teenager after all and I could use a little fun.

To Guy’s surprise, I grabbed his hand and yanked him out of the kitchen toward the front door. But Wilson yelled after us. “One hour!”

“Okay, Wilson,” I cried back. Guy opened the front door and the night air came rushing in, cool and fresh.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked, weaving my fingers through his. A warm line traveled from our touching palms straight to my heart.

Guy shut the door behind us and faced the mountain range ahead. He turned to me with a sly smile. “You’ll have to wait and see.”

TWENTY-SEVEN: GUY

Ever since visiting Lily's gravesite, I saw the world in a whole new way. My mood was lighter, more carefree, and things I'd held in high priority before didn't seem so important anymore. Maybe I'd had it all wrong before, not realizing that life was too short to hold revenge so deep in my heart, too short to let another moment pass by without savoring every second. Lily's death had been a heavy burden I'd carried for far too long. It was time to let go.

And that's what I'd done, let go.

I would eventually have to go back to headquarters to face my men and the life I'd carefully constructed for myself, having a hefty decision to make. I'd have to step back and look at my life through the microscope, seeing if the decisions I'd made before were what I really wanted.

But for now, I didn't want to waste another minute, wanting to give Ruby a gift no one else could— one night of freedom before she was handed off to her soon-to-be family, her new coven, where she would spend the rest of eternity.

"I take it we're not going for ice cream." Ruby sat next to me in the truck, her hands folded into her lap. I peeled from the dirt drive in front of Wilson's, dust billowing from the tires. I glanced from her to the road, unable to control the cheesy grin on my face, unable to take my eyes away from her beauty. "No. Not ice cream."

After a quick drive through the city, we pulled up in front of the planetarium in downtown Tucson. Ruby smiled over at me in realization. I rushed her inside for the last show of the night and we took our seats. The theatre was empty except for the two of us.

The house lights dimmed and a beautiful melody of piano notes trickled through the dome. I arched my neck back and directed my sight to the rounded screen above us, Ruby mirroring my movement.

"I appreciate the gesture," she said, trying to be kind. "You do realize I'm a vampire, though, and I will not be lacking in the opportunities for stargazing? I imagine stars will be one of the only sights I will be able to see for the rest of my life." I didn't miss the playful sarcasm in her voice.

I took her hand in mine and placed it on my knee, her energy buzzing through me. "I didn't bring you to see the stars." I slid her a smile. "I brought

you to see the sunrise."

The room went black; the harmonious sound of music encased us, vibrating through to our toes.

"Think of tonight as your free pass," I whispered into her ear. "When you finally join the coven, your life will be different. You will have to live by their rules. I'm not saying you won't grow accustomed and enjoy it, I'm just saying take advantage of your freedom while you can."

She turned her head and smiled in response. "Thank you."

Stars winked into existence, surrounding us in a twinkling globe of space. We were suspended in air, flying through the galaxy. Ruby giggled with delight at the beautiful scenery.

Through my bond, I felt her excitement, and her innocence. She was just now eighteen and had her entire life ahead of her, though it may be untraditional. She was so unlike me. Where she'd been innocent and naive, living in the comfort of a normal teenage life, I'd been forced to grow up way too fast. She still had so much to learn and see and I wanted the world for her.

Ruby shifted in her seat, her hair smelling of vanilla. The skin of her hand brushed against mine, smooth and ageless.

It was only the two of us, sinking into the sky, nothing but the glowing planets and us. I turned to look upon my vampire, Faith, her profile flickering in the dark and light of the screen, her lashes blinking slowly, bouncing off her full cheeks. My heart sang as her lips curled into a smile and her violet eyes sparkled with stars, my body reacting to her closeness. My skin flushed, my blood warmed, and I wanted to stay in that moment forever, savoring everything about her, everything she made me feel. I couldn't help but notice how her purity and sweetness was such a juxtaposition to the transformation she had embodied, a perfect balance of innocence and ferocity. She was flawless.

The screen changed to the landscape of the moon, the Earth rising above us in a ball of green and blue. The Earth then vanished and out came the sunrise.

Ruby gasped. The great ball of yellow light rose in the blackness of space, small from this distance, but so brilliant from our own little place on the moon. She squeezed my hand and shivers traveled my spine from her touch. My attention flickered back and forth from her to the ceiling, the sky. Her eyes widened as the sun ascended, stars spinning around it like a galactic cyclone, shining and twinkling.

She laughed, our gazes clashing, and my eyes dropped to her lips. I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to kiss her like I had at the drug store but then I remembered I'd only done it then to hide her fangs, and to protect myself. But maybe it'd been more than just an impromptu action to save both our lives? Her lips against mine had made me feel strange and warm, pleasant, but I'd brushed it away as fast as the sensation had come.

But now, I knew if I kissed her, I'd never stop. She'd suck me into her

blissful innocence and I'd never find my way out. I couldn't do that to her and I couldn't do that to myself. I wanted the best for her, and although I wished it was *me* that would benefit her life, it just wasn't so. My gut clenched. The end of her training was nearing and this would be one of the last moments I'd spend with her. And in a couple of short days, it would be as if we'd never met, going our separate ways.

"Thank you," she breathed, turning away to gaze up at the false sky. I wanted to tell her it was no big deal. I wanted to say I'd have done it for anyone. But I couldn't, my mouth dry and my heart swollen.

Though our time was nearly over, I would always remember her in that moment. Remember her smile, her laugh, her wonder. Remember the way she changed me and made me a better person. I'd always remember my vampire Faith. My Ruby.

TWENTY-EIGHT: RUBY

The glow of the yellow spotlight highlighted Wilson's brown hair, adding an auburn glow to it. His lips were moving but I didn't hear a word, like watching a silent movie in the background, I was preoccupied elsewhere.

Guy.

Just the idea of him brought tingles to my skin and a rush of heat through my body. Earlier that night he'd taken me to the planetarium to see the stars and the sunrise and, for being such a hard-ass when I'd first met him, he was turning out surprisingly thoughtful. Yet when the fluttery, warm thoughts of him arose inside of me, a darkness came along with them— my future. A future without Guy was like a fish without water—pointless. In just a few short days, I'd be all alone in some supernatural city where I'd have to relearn everything and live amongst vampires and werewolves, obeying their rules. The thought made me shiver.

And yes, as Guy had stressed to me, this was my new chance at life, a fresh start. But I wasn't too sure I wanted to embark on a do-over just yet. I was quite content in the old ranch house with my two-hundred year old teacher and my Captain Stone.

"Ruby. Concentrate." Wilson's voice jolted me from my stupor and I shook my head, blinking my mentor's face back into focus. "I want you to try to sense me. My feelings and my mood." We were back at it again. Good ol' vampire training.

Thoughts of Guy and my soon-to-be new life fled, leaving me with the task of arduous concentration. I did what Wilson taught me and stuffed all of my thoughts and emotions into a little box. I then let the box go, vanishing it into thin air, leaving my mind a blank slate. I focused on Wilson and tried to grasp his emotions, tried to sense his moods. But there was nothing. I released the air from my lungs and slumped my shoulders in frustration.

"Listen, Ruby," Wilson began, rubbing his chin in thought. "This isn't as hard as it seems. Vampires have a sixth sense so to speak; the ability to sense other's moods and feelings. It comes in handy when hunting a predator and sensing their fear. It's similar to bonding, but for a much shorter duration of time."

I shifted my weight and wrapped my arms around my chest. Why did I have to do this? With my distaste for human blood, it's not as if I would be

hunting them down anytime soon. I dug my nails into my arms in hesitation. "I understand, Wilson. It's just… I feel… nothing."

Wilson turned and paced in a straight line, back and forth in front of me. He unbuttoned the cuffs of his orange dress shirt and rolled up the sleeves to get comfortable. He tucked his bolo tie beneath his shirt and stopped in front of me. A toad croaked somewhere in the distance.

"Let me ask you something. Have you never once felt something since you've turned? The smallest inkling of emotions or feelings from someone else?"

I bit my lower lip in thought, wringing my hands together. This training stuff was harder than I'd imagined. "I don't know."

Wilson regarded me. "Think hard. It comes naturally. There must've been at least one time you sensed something. Fear? Pain? Sadness?"

"Umm." I wracked my brain, searching for what Wilson was talking about. I kept coming up short, but then it hit me and I snapped my fingers. "Actually, I think I might have. I sensed fear from Guy when he first found me. And fear on you in the red room. But I don't feel it anymore."

Wilson's face contorted into something that might've been mistaken for pleasure. "Good! That's exactly what I am talking about! That's the part of your brain you need to access. It's achieved the same way as anything else, like speed or vision. Except with this, you need to reach out to the person you are trying to read."

"Okay." I nodded eagerly and closed my eyes. Yet again, I cleared my thoughts.

"Now, reach out to me with your mind," Wilson said, as if from at the end of a long tunnel, his voice echoing ethereally through my head.

I reached out to him, focusing on his energy. I felt something there but it was closed off as though through a blockade or wall. I tried harder for a few long moments, sweat beading my forehead and my lungs tightening with effort. But I lost it and thoughts of my failure rushed to mind.

"I'm sorry," I said, panting. "I felt something there but I couldn't get to it."

Wilson considered me for one long moment, searching my face like a professor would a scientific equation. "Wait here," he said.

Before I could even speak, he was gone in a flash, leaving me in a cloud of dust. I was starting to think this vampire training stuff wasn't for me after all when he was already back, a flustered Guy in tow. My savior's damp hair hung in his eyes and water beaded down his bare chest. He was shirtless after just stepping out of the shower —not that I minded— but he looked irritated and ripped his strong bicep from Wilson's grasp.

"Jeez." He rubbed the red marks on his arm from Wilson's fingers. "Next time, a little warning would be appreciated."

"Read him." Wilson ignored Guy's annoyed glare and shoved him toward me. "Read his mood, his emotions. But do not physically touch him."

I shot an embarrassed glance back at Wilson, but he shooed me on with a flap of his hand. I met Guy's stare, my knees wobbling. Did I really want to know what Guy was feeling? His innermost emotions? It seemed very intrusive and I wasn't sure I liked it.

Guy didn't question Wilson's motives, nor did he utter a single word. He stepped closer to me, practically devouring me with his eyes. We were so close I felt the heat evaporating from his body. So close, I felt his breath on my face, fresh mint and coffee. God, this was unnerving.

"Go on," Wilson urged. "If Captain Stone is the one person that enabled you to use your senses before, then surely he can do it again."

I nodded, sucking in a gulp of air. I closed my eyes and cleared my mind, allowing myself to float in black nothingness. Even the sounds of the night seemed to fade away, the croaking frogs falling silent. I mentally reached out to Guy, the fingers of my brain delving into him. And like a finger in an electrical socket, I was jolted by him, all of his energy shocking me to the core. Startled, I gasped.

"What do you sense?" Wilson's voice broke through my concentration like a shard of glass in my heel, sharp and brazen. "What is he feeling?"

"He feels you need a new wardrobe," I quipped, unable to help myself. All of this closeness and mind-delving was getting a little too hot and heavy. Guy chuckled, bringing a smile to my face, but I kept my eyes closed.

Wilson sputtered a false laugh and I could practically see him rolling his eyes. I heard his feet shuffle in the dirt. "Good try. But this is not mind reading. It's *mood* reading. Try again."

Reluctantly, I focused harder on Guy's pulsing energy. It was like a beam of light surrounding him, warm and vibrant.

"I… I feel his strength." My voice came out as a whisper, my eyes still shut tight. "His dominance." It was there, hard as nails, his commanding nature. But I sensed something else beneath it.

"Good, good. That is his being. Now, what else? You need to go deeper. What is he *feeling* right now?"

Oh, my God. Could I do this? Did I have any other choice but to try? I slowed my breath, letting it in and out softly. I kept my mind focused on Guy, the effort making me shake. I pushed harder.

"I feel… relief. Like a weight's been lifted." I wasn't sure why Guy would feel that way, but I trudged on, uncovering his emotions like bugs under a rock. And then something else tickled my senses, like a feather on skin. "I feel… not fear, but… apprehension?"

"Go on," Wilson urged through the inky blackness.

In that moment I was so close to Guy it was like his soul was pouring into me, filling me to the brim like a cup of thick hot chocolate. But then…

"I sense a…a foreboding. Like trepidation?"

"Keep going."

"I feel…" And there it was, the one part I'd been afraid I might find—

the way he felt about me. It was warm and protective, solid and passionate. The energy of him bled into me, covering me like a warm blanket and I knew instantly what it was. It was *love*. I panicked and my eyes flew open.

"That's all," I announced, stumbling backwards from Guy.

"That is it?" Wilson questioned me, his expression deep with curiosity.

I reeled myself back in from the onslaught of Guy's emotions tearing through me. I couldn't believe he actually felt that way for me. Especially now, when we had to part. I calmed myself and sighed, focusing on the peeling paint of the shed. "Yep. The bottom of the barrel. I can't feel anything else."

Guy wasn't smiling, nor was he frowning. He just looked at me deeply, so deeply. God, I knew it then, he loved me. And I loved him. A vampire killer and a vampire in love with each other. Ha, what a freaking screwed-up world we lived in.

Wilson scratched at the back of his head and sighed. "All right, then. I could go for some refreshments. Care to join?" He looked between me and Guy.

Guy shifted his weight, the gleam from the moon cascading down his bare muscled chest. His steel eyes lingered on me for one long moment. "I'll let you two go ahead. I'm going to finish getting dressed." He turned to Wilson with mocking sarcasm. "Only if it's all right with you?"

Wilson said nothing, his expression impassive.

Guy looked back to me and I shrugged, resisting the urge to laugh. I totally wouldn't mind if he decided to join us just the way he was, shirtless. But I understood his modesty all too well. Guy flashed me a boyish smile, like the one when he earlier whisked me away on our 'date,' and then took off toward the house.

I walked with Wilson, trying to match the slowness of his pace but tripped over my own feet in doing so. Wilson chuckled wryly. He grasped my arm and led me into the house.

As I followed Wilson up the yard I couldn't help but wonder if I'd ever gain control over my new body. But I also wondered, when the time came, if I'd ever be able to part from Guy.

TWENTY-NINE: RUBY

I was still rattled by the emotions I'd gleaned from Guy during my training. They were like a big, fluorescent, blinking arrow pointing to the fact that he loved me, and I couldn't help but blush at the thought of it. I'm not gonna lie and say it hadn't been awkward in that moment— the moment I literally forced my way into his brain— but now, knowing he reciprocated the feelings I had for him, I felt all warm and gushy inside. I never knew it could be this way, caring for someone so much that it ached like a stubbed toe, but it's not like I had much to compare it to. I hadn't realized it before, but, John, my former boyfriend, had treated me like crap. And especially now, after meeting Guy and seeing how selfless and caring *he* was, I knew how it felt to be truly wanted and adored.

But the feelings we shared were especially unnerving because they didn't matter. Much to my dismay, Guy and I would be parting ways soon. We would never see each other again. That's why I tried my hardest to brush away the warmth in my belly, steeling myself for what was to come. I'd be with my own kind soon and couldn't worry with my silly, girly infatuations.

I stood in the kitchen, staring numbly out the window as Wilson closed the curtains in preparation for the sun. He grabbed two chalices from a shelf on the wall and retrieved a bag of blood from the fridge —the one full of human blood Guy and I had stolen. He filled the cups and handed me one. I grimaced and sat down at the table, wondering how I could avoid drinking the stuff without Wilson noticing. Goat's blood was bad enough, but this? *Gag.*

He took a sip of his and slid me a sideways glance, looking suspicious. "Something wrong?"

I shook my head but said nothing, clasping my fingers tightly around the cup, feeling the liquid's coldness through the porcelain.

Wilson sighed, scrubbing his forehead with his fingers. "You need to feed Ruby. It won't do you any good to refuse human blood. That's all you will have available to you when you're in Tombstone."

Well, apparently he already knew of my aversion so there was no sense in hiding it anymore. Still though, I didn't know how to approach the topic without him thinking I was a freak so I kept quiet.

Wilson took another sip and when I gave no response, he continued. "It seems quite peculiar to me that you do not seem to crave as other vampires

do. Do humans not make you salivate?"

I looked down at the chalice of red thickness in my hands, my stomach churning. I then glanced to the walls, absentmindedly taking in all of the pictures and strange memorabilia hanging there. Salivating over human blood was not my subject of choice, but obviously I couldn't avoid it. "Not really. It just seems… wrong."

"Hmm." Wilson paced the kitchen, his thin body moving in and out of light and shadow from the old overhead hanging lamp.

"But I did crave a vampire." Once the words left my mouth, I knew I'd seriously screwed up and clamped a hand over my mouth. Guilt rose up to burn my throat like acid, but not from the actual act of killing the vampire—he would've killed Guy and me if given the chance. No, the guilt came from a place of what others would think of me, what *Wilson* would think of me.

Wilson stopped dead in his tracks. "You what?"

Cringing, I lowered my eyes, hoping he would not think I was a weirdo, or worse yet, a murderer. I mentally readied myself and continued, trying to explain what I'd done.

"Shortly after I met Guy, he was attacked by a vampire. He almost died, Wilson. And I could smell the vamp. He smelled… delicious. And I drained him. I… I killed him."

I dropped my head, ashamed over my admission. Was I in fact a murderer? Did self-defense constitute such a crime? And not only had I killed someone, I'd killed one of my own kind. I hoped I could trust Wilson. He was an outcast himself, and I hoped he wouldn't turn me in. I nervously looked up into my teacher's wide eyes and waited for his reply.

"You killed another vampire?" he repeated, shock written all over his face.

"Yes." I bit my bottom lip. "But it was in defense of Guy's life. He was dying."

Wilson sighed and leaned against the kitchen counter. He frowned, drumming his fingers on the granite in thought. A lump formed in my throat.

"Am I going to be in trouble, Wilson? For killing another vampire?"

"Was anyone else there to witness this act?" He stretched his neck tensely to the side.

"No."

He exhaled through puffed up cheeks. "You might have been lucky enough to escape a sentence of execution."

I frowned, morbid fear rushing through me. A sentence of execution? God, I'd just recently escaped my own death, and narrowly at that. The idea of having to go through it again terrified me. I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't allow it to happen. I had killed that vampire for a reason, not out of malice or anger. I'd done it out of defense, to save Guy's life. My own life. No, I wouldn't go down without a fight. I raised my head stoically.

"But like I said, Wilson, it was in defense!"

"Doesn't matter," Wilson retorted. "Not only did you kill a member of your own kind, but you did it in order to protect a *human*. And not just any human. A human who is one of the most influential leaders of FUSE. And in case you didn't know, FUSE is a vampire's worst enemy. You would be seen as a traitor."

My nerves lit up like a neon sign. I was only a few days old in my new life and I'd already committed the most treacherous crime of my kind. My heart pounded in my chest. "Are you going to turn me in, Wilson?"

Wilson laughed abruptly and clasped his hands together. "If I did that, I'd be incriminating myself. No, I will not turn you in."

I studied him and realized my presumption had been right. He was similar to me in the fact that we were outcasts and I knew then that I could trust him. My body relaxed, only slightly though. I was still wound up from knowing the possible recourse for my actions, imagining a group of terrifying beasts coming after me with torches and pitchforks.

Wilson sat down next to me, snapping me out of my frightful thoughts. He focused all his attention on me, his dark eyes looking even darker in that moment. "You know, I've been thinking." He twiddled his fingers together, his voice sounding strange and foreboding. I warily raised my brows. "I've been thinking a lot about how different you are from myself and any other vampire I've ever met."

Oh? Shock traveled through me. Here I'd been thinking we were one in the same, two creatures cut from the same cloth, but the comfort of that thought was ripped away by his words. I couldn't begin to understand what he meant by me being different so I regarded the old vampire with curiosity, practically watching the wheels turning in his mind. He shook his head in disbelief, but carried on. "But I think I'm right in my assumption."

"What assumption?" Nervous anticipation slithered up my body like a cold snake, and I could feel the color draining from my face.

"Well…" Wilson leaned back in his chair and scratched his chin in thought. "I found it strange the level of humanity you still embodied after turning— not to mention your unmatched strength and speed. But your compassion, sympathy and mercy… the unconditional kindness in your heart, is unusual. And now that I know you saved a human's life instead of draining him dry…"

I wriggled uncomfortably in my chair, not liking where this conversation was going. I didn't want to be different. I didn't want to stand out from the crowd. I just wanted to be normal— well, as normal as a vampire could be in the given situation— but I had the feeling he was going to tell me otherwise. Guy had said it before and now Wilson was just adding another layer to the fact that I was different.

"The way you do not lust for human blood," he continued as if counting off accusations on his fingers. "Your surprising strength. Your speed and agility." He shook his head again, as if battling his own mind. I wished he

would just get it over with and spit it out.

"Wilson," I breathed, desperation coursing through me. "Is there something wrong with me?" I almost laughed. Of course, there was something wrong with me, I was a vampire, for crying out loud. But what else? What else could there be?

"No," Wilson answered. "Not *wrong* per se, just different. Special."

And there it was. The words I didn't want to hear. *Different. Special*. But what did it mean? My heart pounded rapidly as I gazed onto my mentor's face.

"It all leads to one thing," he said. "I do believe that you are, in fact, a hybrid."

"A what?"

"A hybrid. A mix-blood. A half-breed."

I shook my head, my mouth hanging open. I couldn't even begin to understand what he was talking about.

Wilson saw my dumbfounded expression and leaned in, steepling his fingers. "Listen carefully." He spoke as though instructing a class full of fourth-graders. "A hybrid is a combination of two species. In your case, vampire and human."

His words barely crested the top of my confused brain.

"But how?"

Wilson let a smile peel across his lips. "It may sound complicated, but it's not. It's actually quite simple, though a very rare case indeed." He stood and took a deep breath. He began pacing the small kitchen, his gaze distant and far away, like he was grasping at forgotten information from a book he'd read long ago.

"Yes, you were human before. And yes you were turned into a vampire *by* a vampire. But here's the difference: A hybrid like you would have a different chromosome in their blood, passed down through the genetic family tree." He spun to me quickly. "Let me ask you a question. Were you ever seen as different growing up? Stronger than most? Smarter? Having a sixth sense or any other distinctions you can think of?" His eyes bored into me, searching for answers I didn't have.

"No." I shook my head. "I don't think so. I was pretty normal."

Wilson gazed at me for a long moment before waving a dismissive hand. "That doesn't matter. Every hybrid is different in their own way. Now stay with me here." He walked a small circle before stopping. He scrubbed at his chin. "Let me explain it like this. Have you ever been given a vaccination? A shot for, let's say, influenza?"

I nodded. Of course, I had. It was required of all students attending school. But I realized that Wilson was very old and when he was a human things might've been different back then.

"Good. Now think of that shot. It is a dead virus that was placed into your bloodstream, one that would make you immune if you were ever

exposed to it in real life. That is how a hybrid's blood works." He sat back down in the chair next to me, an excited glimmer to his eyes. "Though it lay dormant and inactive, you've always had something in your blood Ruby. A vampire chromosome. As farfetched as it may sound, somewhere in your family history, a human mated with a vampire, producing a hybrid. A half-human half-vampire. And then that hybrid reproduced. And so on. But it is likely that through the generations that gene was suppressed. And because of your exposure to vampire blood, when you were turned by your maker, it has now been activated within you."

I shook my head again, mouth agape in disbelief. All of the information was making my head pound and I narrowed my eyes against the pain.

"So you're saying that my…" I searched for the word while pressing my fingers to my temples. "Would it be *condition*? You're saying that my condition is rare?"

Wilson nodded and licked his lips. "There've only been a few known cases like yours. So unfortunately, there's not much to go on."

To say I was dumbfounded would be a huge understatement. Wilson was saying that I was some weird mutation of vampire and human. As if being a vampire wasn't weird enough, now I was even more of a freak. *God*. I couldn't wrap my mind around it. But I still had so many questions. I let them pour from my mouth like water from a broken pipe.

"Am I still immortal, or can I die like a human? Can I eat food? What does this mean for me, Wilson? Am I still able to join the others like we'd planned? Will they know I'm different? Will they hate me?"

My heart raced and my skull pounded numbly. My breathing was harsh and quick with anxiety. Wilson placed a hand on my shaking shoulder. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. It's going to be okay."

I lifted my lashes to him. "Is it though? If I am as you say, a hybrid, and its rare, then how do you know it's going to be okay?"

He shook his head and took a deep breath. "I don't know anything for sure. There is no rulebook. There are no guidelines for being a vampire or a hybrid vampire for that matter. But I can tell you are strong, not only in body, but in mind. You will find your way and you will be able to handle it. In time things will work themselves out and you will figure out a way."

My throat felt like it was closing in on itself and I spoke in a scratchy voice. "Wilson, I… I don't want to be different. I don't even want to be a vampire. I just… I want to go home." My eyes burned, threatening tears.

Wilson's chest heaved with suppressed emotion. He tilted his head. "There are things you can change, young one, like how you view the world and what you do during your time here. But there are some things you cannot change. Being a vampire is one of them. And Tombstone *will* be your home. Just give it a chance. You might end up liking it there."

Though I didn't want to admit it, somewhere in the back of my mind I knew he was right. I couldn't change what I was any more than a chicken that

wanted to fly. But that still didn't stop my mind from being on overdrive, my emotions a balloon ready to pop. But I took in a calming breath and reeled myself back in, allowing the balloon in my chest to deflate. I blinked my eyes dry. I'd come too far to let this newfound information break me down. Like Wilson said, I was strong and I would find a way.

"But you are right in your trepidations about the others," Wilson said, breaking through my frantic musings. His forehead was lined with thought, making me uneasy. "Now that I know what you are, it would be best if you not announce your anomaly to the others. I'm not sure how they would handle it. When you arrive in Tombstone, its best to keep your head down and not draw attention to yourself. I hope that by the time you leave here you will be able to fully control yourself and they will know none the better."

I nodded, hoping that his confidence in me was valid. I too, hoped I would be able to control myself.

"But the most important thing is," he tapped my untouched chalice. "You *must* drink human blood when you get there. If you do not, they will suspect you are different. And that could potentially cause a problem."

I flinched with unease. How could I do that? How could I force myself to drink human blood? It was wrong on so many levels. And freaking gross, too. I sighed heavily, trying not to think about the thick red liquid traveling down my throat.

I dropped my head to my hands and massaged my aching head. My mind was swirling like a cyclone with all of the new information. It was too much, too soon.

Sensing this, Wilson reached out and rubbed my shoulder gently.

"Don't worry about the details just yet. Knowledge will come in time. Every vampire has to start somewhere."

He was right. I had bigger matters to worry about, like making myself acceptable to the new vampire coven I would be joining in a couple of days. I needed more training. I needed to accept my new life and try my hardest to fit in.

The tension in my head forgotten, I glanced at Wilson and shrugged my shoulders. I would get through this no matter what. I had no other choice. "How about I try another spoon, Wilson?"

He smiled and handed me another utensil. "Good idea."

THIRTY-GUY

I watched Ruby through the window, her light hair a stark contrast to the darkness of night, her beautiful form delicate yet so strong. My heart squeezed in my chest at the sight of her. She sat alone on the stoop of the back porch, a pile of broken spoons next to her on the bricks. She tried again and again, with unwavering concentration, determined as ever to perfect this one last skill before being integrated with the other Unfortunates.

I stuffed my hands in my pockets and released a pent-up breath of air. The last couple of days had been intense, to say the least. What with visiting Lily's gravesite and my revelation there, letting go of my past. Taking Ruby to view the sunrise at the planetarium and seeing the joy it brought her. Realizing the feelings I had for her were real, not to mention my bond to her. But when Wilson had placed me in front of Ruby, instructing her to read my mood— *that* had been the hardest so far.

My bond to her had flared when she stared into my eyes, my body pulsing with our connection. Or, *my* connection to *her,* rather. And she'd been right about everything. She'd been right about my controlling manner, my hesitation over leaving her, and my loyalty to my duty. But then she'd faltered, literally stumbling away from me as if I were a flame about to burn her. I couldn't help but wonder what she'd sensed in me and if it had been my deep need to protect her and take care of her. Or had she discerned my feelings for her I tried so desperately to deny? I wasn't sure what she saw or sensed, and now, with our time running short, I wasn't sure I'd ever find out.

For the past few days, I'd sat idly by while she trained with Wilson, feeling useless. I'd wished there was something more I could do for her, wished I could help ease the ache I sensed inside of her. An ache only someone who has lost everything could ever know. Deep inside me, her pain was a part of my soul.

But I supposed I'd done all I could in bringing her here and helping her find her place in life. I couldn't help but think of her as a true warrior for I'd never seen a vampire so strong, never seen an Unfortunate hone their skills so quickly, as if she was meant to be this way all along. Her movements, though still somewhat choppy, were growing more fluid, her strength more controlled. She was a natural. A beautiful, natural vampire. Quite the oxymoron.

If someone had told me I'd one day fall in love with a vampire, I'd have laughed in their face. Me, caring for the likes of the thing I hated most and falling for the enemy, was an irony I'd never known. And though I would always be bonded to her, always sense her presence like a ghost in the back of my mind, our time was coming to an end. And I hate to admit, a little too quickly for my liking.

My insides grew heavy like cement when thinking it was our last night here at the old ranch house, the last night we would be together, the last night I could look upon her flawless face and feel her arms wrap around me in a tender hug. It was for the best that we part, I'd known it all along, but I still couldn't push away the hankering it should be different somehow. Maybe it was my bond to her, or maybe it was all we had been through together. But it didn't change the fact that letting her go would be the hardest thing I would ever have to do. Ruby broke another spoon and placed it next to her on the ground, unfazed. She took up another from a box and wrapped her fingers around each end.

I opened the sliding glass door and joined her on the stoop. She didn't look over at me but kept her eyes closed tight in concentration. After a few long moments, the spoon snapped. She blew out a puff of air and turned her attention to me. I smiled, eliciting one from her too.

"You'll get it," I said. "Just takes time."

She dropped the broken pieces into the pile and scooted closer to me, our sides touching. She laid her head on my shoulder and gazed out into the night. A large sticker tree swayed in response to the warm breeze, its shadow shifting across the ground in the moonlight. I resisted the urge to grab her into my arms and kiss her, to savor the last moments I could with her. But it was not the time to let my emotions have their way with me, and I knew in my heart, there never would be a right time.

"I know." Ruby inhaled deeply. "I will get it. But I can't help feeling that I'm not ready yet."

"You're ready." I laid my hand on her thigh and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

"I guess." She sighed and snuggled in closer, as if to warm her cool body. Her arms were bare and her right one brushed my left, blooming my bond to her even more. I could feel her affections toward me like a blast of heat and I resisted the urge to shake my head in frustration. I ignored the feelings I was gleaning from her and turned to take in her physical form.

She was wearing some of the clothes I'd bought for her while in town, a pair of jeans and a pink T-shirt. She looked lovely. She lifted her head from my shoulder and turned her violet gaze upon me, questioning.

"Guy?" Her voice was like the first drop of rain; tentative. I turned to her.

"Yes."

"Do you think I'll ever find out who my maker is?"

Seeing the hope in her eyes, I hesitated.

I thought about the information my intelligence officer, Todd Kemp, gave me about the way Ruby had died. But what he didn't know was after she'd perished in the car crash, someone— a vampire, no doubt— had swiped her from the wreck, possibly only seconds before the car exploded, leaving authorities to assume she'd been incinerated. I thought about the coven we'd vanquished at the Bisbee warehouse and how I found her alone, without her maker. She was the only survivor and that meant her maker was certainly dead along with the rest of the Unfortunates from that night. It was likely she would never find out who turned her but I didn't want to completely strip her of her hope.

"I don't know." I watched the breeze pull a strand of hair from her braid and flutter across her cheek. Sympathy yawned through my body over what this girl had endured, over all she had lost, and my heart clenched in sorrow for her.

She leaned in closer to me. "It's just… I was wondering… Wilson said…" She let her words trail off in the wind and heaved a sigh. I waited expectantly for what she would say, knowing she was holding something back. I could feel something through my bond to her, something like fear, but she waved a dismissive hand as though banishing the thought, and the feelings of dread dissipated. "Never mind."

"What is it?" I asked, grazing my thumb over her shoulder. I wanted to help her, wanted her to feel comfortable telling me whatever it was that weighed on her mind. Ruby met my gaze, her purple irises shining in the dim porch light.

"It's just… I've been having these dreams." She kneaded her hands together in apprehension and I couldn't help but feel she'd changed the subject. But I didn't want to push something she was uncomfortable with.

"Dreams?" I asked, urging her to continue.

"Yes. Well, memories, really. Of the night I died. But every time I think I will remember what happened, who made me, something stops me. As though I'm not supposed to know." Her shoulders drooped slightly and I pulled her in closer, her head resting on my shoulder.

"Maybe," I offered, breathing in her vanilla scent, "You will eventually remember. Maybe it will happen when you need it most."

She turned her head and looked up at me, her pink lips curling up at the edges in a smile.

"Maybe." Ruby's gaze then roamed the sky as if looking for far away answers, answers I wished I could offer her. I got the feeling there was still something she wasn't telling me, but still, I didn't want to push the issue.

"Did Wilson fill you in on where I'm taking you?" I figured a change of subject was due.

"Yes." She focused her worried eyes on me. "But will it be safe for you?"

Safe? The term was relevant. But I knew I had to do it, whether it was

safe or not. “I’ll be fine. As long as I don’t get too close.”

Silence fell upon us for a brief moment before Ruby looked over at me again. “So you won’t tell FUSE about me, when you go back to your men? You won’t tell them about Tombstone or Wilson?”

I turned my body to hers and took her hands in mine. Her eyes glistened, striking a pang through my heart. It hurt that she even asked those questions, that she would even doubt my motives. But she knew as well as I did, that we were enemies and I understood her fear. I took in the fullness of her lips, the curve of her face.

“I haven’t come all this way, sacrificed everything to help you, to just turn around and ruin it. I’d never do that to you. And even though I don’t like to admit it, I’d never do that to Wilson. I kind of have a soft spot for the old guy.”

Ruby giggled, her body relaxing in relief. She ran her fingers down the length of my arm, raking goose bumps across my flesh. I took her chin between my thumb and forefinger, tilting her head up toward mine. “But you must promise the same, to never mention me or Wilson to the others. It would not only endanger Wilson, but you would be in danger as well. They must never know.”

She nodded. “I promise. I will keep our secret to my death.” I let my fingers drop from her face, satisfied by her pledge. But was I really satisfied? Was I content with the way our journey was playing out? I wasn’t so sure.

“But, Guy,” she whispered, bringing my attention back to her. “What do I tell them? I’m sure they’ll ask about my past and how I came to be there.”

I clenched my jaw in response. I’d already spent restless nights mulling over the same question and the best solution I’d come up with was to lie. It was the only way.

“At first, you tell them the truth, how you died in the crash and awoke in the front of the old warehouse during the battle. You were alone and confused. But instead of the part where *I* found you, you tell them you escaped. You crawled into a ditch and hid yourself beneath the brush and, when you deemed it safe, you found the old mission where you transformed. You’d been living off the blood of rabbits and mice. And when you felt strong enough, you traveled in search of others like you. Tell them you wanted to go home but were afraid of what your family might think, and that’s when you found the coven.”

I never liked being dishonest, but when it came to life or death, you had to bite the bullet. And being what I was, the Captain in a top-secret sect of the government, I’d grown accustomed to lies and cover-ups. It was the only way I knew. And now it would be what Ruby knew— lying for the greater good.

Ruby gently bit her bottom lip, letting what I’d said sink in. She nodded in agreement and found my hand with hers. She twined her fingers with mine, gazing out into the darkness, and I got a sense she could see a whole other world out there that I couldn’t. We spent the duration of the night sitting in

silence, soaking in the passing moments, savoring them as though it were the last night we'd be on this Earth. It was the happiest and saddest time of my life. A bittersweet ending.

THIRTY-ONE: RUBY

Guy and I sat on the back porch for hours, listening to the breeze blow and watching the stars twinkle. It was our last night together before he took me to my new home. There were so many things I wanted to say to him like how I was a hybrid, a half-breed human and vampire, a freak.

But what good would that do? I didn't even know what it meant myself. And if I did tell him, would he change his mind and let me go with him instead of parting ways? Probably not. I was still half-vampire and it would never work between us. There was no point in telling him, except to maybe make things harder.

I also wanted to tell him how I felt for him, how I didn't know if I could go on without him. But the words stuck, dry in my throat. Again, it would do no good to say anything, only causing him more pain than I'd already caused him. I didn't want to do that. He'd already been through enough in saving me and I didn't want to hurt him any more than I already had. So after much struggle, I let the night go on in silence, enjoying what little time we had left together.

After sitting upon the back porch for what seemed forever, we regretfully retired inside. Guy meandered out front to make sure the truck was in good working order for our trip the next night. He'd told me not to wait up for him, saying I needed to rest. Though I wanted to ignore his request and stay up for him, wanting to relish every last moment I could with him, my body and mind were exhausted. Not only had I been blasted with the whole I'm-a-freaky-vampire-mutation information, but I'd also been training relentlessly for days and couldn't fight the tired ache anymore.

I showered and wove my hair into a long braid before venturing back out into the hall. I heard soft murmuring in the living room but stopped short when Wilson's voice sharply spoke.

"You can't hide it from me, Stone. I know what you've done." I froze, my hands pressing into the wall.

"And what have I done?" Guy retorted, his voice low and harsh. I felt the tension between them, thick and palpable.

"You've bonded to the Newborn. You will forever be connected with Ruby in a way you cannot be with anyone else."

My heart dropped to my stomach. Oh my God, bonded. Guy had bonded

himself to me. But how?

And then I remembered the only time it could've happened and I resisted the urge to do a face-palm. It'd been the night at the mission, the night that horrible vampire attacked him and I fed Guy my blood. But Wilson had said bonding was more than just the exchange of blood. He'd said it held a deep emotional connection. I wondered if Guy had cared about me this entire time, his feelings for me allowing him to bond to me in such a way. Though the notion was unbelievable I could see no other logical explanation.

Guy sighed, frustrated. "Did I have any other choice, Wilson?"

Guilt flooded me. It *hadn't* been Guy's choice, because *I'd* been the one to decide to heal him. *I'd* been the one to force my blood into his mouth and it was my fault he was now bonded to me. But I'd had no other option. He'd been dying…

I leaned closer against the doorjamb.

"I suppose you're right. You didn't have a choice in it." Wilson's voice then took on an accusatory tone. "But you made a choice to take her in the first place. To save her from FUSE."

"Maybe I shouldn't have," Guy said, and his words sliced through me painfully, but I kept still and silent. "But I did. I can't go back now."

"I agree," the old vampire replied. "You can't go back now. But I can sense your uncertainty and your hesitation. Don't regret your choices now, boy, not when I was just starting to like you again."

Guy laughed wryly. "It's not that. It's… I don't know, Wilson. I feel like I can't leave her now. Like I must stay with her and protect her."

My heart sang at Guy's words. *Yes!* I wanted to scream out. *Stay with me!* The thought of separating from the one man who made me feel safe was terrifying. But I kept quiet, waiting to hear what he would say next.

"Do you love her?" Wilson asked. Heat rushed to my middle, my breath catching in my chest. But Guy didn't reply.

"Listen," Wilson continued. "What you've done is an act of nobility. I don't like to admit it, but I respect your decision. But now you must let her go. Do not force on her what I forced upon Nora many years ago."

Nora. I remembered the story Wilson told me about his human. The human he'd loved long ago and bonded to. Was it similar to our situation now?

"I decided her fate and her death all in one night," Wilson dredged on. "Don't do the same to Ruby, she deserves more than that. She deserves a good life with her own kind. If she bonded to you in turn, she would be chained to a life on the run and forever be a target. She would live a life of fear and sadness. Just promise me you will let her go."

The silence fell heavy and I could hear my own painful heartbeat in my ears.

"You don't have to worry, Wilson." Guy replied to my dismay. "I will let her go. I could never do anything to harm her."

Wilson cleared his throat. “I do understand though, there’s something about Ruby. I feel it too. There’s something that makes me want to take her under my wing and protect her. But it is best for us all to go our own ways and wipe our memories clean of all this. We mustn’t dwell on the past, only look to the future.”

I hated to admit it, but Wilson was right. We had to go on and forget all about our past, but that still didn’t change the fact that I didn’t want my time here to end. A soft, sorrowful breath passed my trembling lips and the two men paused as if hearing my pain, but to my relief Guy spoke up.

“I promise. Everything will go as planned. I will not let her out of my sight until she enters the gates of Tombstone.”

“Good. You have all of my instructions?”

“Yes.”

“Once you get there, you must take the greatest care not to be seen,” Wilson warned.

“Of course.” Guy’s voice held a grim darkness, barely audible.

I heard Wilson shift in his seat. “And I can trust you never to disclose the location of the hub? Am I right to assume you will forever keep it to yourself?”

“On my honor,” Guy rumbled.

“Good. Because in the case you ever did let something slip, not only would our precious Ruby be in grave danger, but there would be a war so great, the bloodshed would be immeasurable. A war the likes of which this world has never seen before. And it would be all on your shoulders.”

My throat clenched at the severity of Wilson’s words. Until now, I’d never realized just how much a threat my mere presence posed.

“Tombstone is like a hornet’s nest,” he went on. “And you do not want to be the grizzly responsible for shaking it up.”

Guy grunted and stood, the familiar sound of his boots grating across the crumbling Spanish tiles. “I understand. You can trust me.”

I quietly backed away and retreated into the room Guy and I shared. I sat on the bed and placed my face in my hands, my nerves a jumbled mess. I’d barely just discovered my vampiric gifts and how different I was, and now I was expected to join a coven that was more than likely centuries old? Fear tugged at my heart as I wondered if I would be accepted.

I stooped over and reached beneath the bed to pull out my most prized possession, the picture of my parents. I looked down at the happy faces, wondering how my life would’ve turned out had I not died. I wondered what would’ve happened had John never broken up with me and I’d never gone driving in the storm. I wondered especially what I’d be doing on this exact night. I sure as heck wouldn’t be in a vampire’s secret home training for integration into a society of werewolves and witches, that’s for sure.

I closed my eyes and imagined I was in my parent’s home, waiting on the front porch swing with my dad while my mom cooked her famous meatloaf. I

imagined my father's arm around my shoulder and the aroma of dinner baking in the oven, my legs swinging as the cool night breeze swept in, a welcomed respite to the blaring Arizona sunshine I'd become so accustomed to.

Sunshine.

I could almost feel the sunshine on my skin warming me, and my heart sank, knowing I would never have that sensation again. Never again would I watch the sunrise or the sunset. Never again would I eat my mother's meatloaf. Never again would I sit on the front porch, swinging with my father. A sob clenched my throat, but I was unable to let it out before a tap sounded at the door.

"Ruby?" Wilson asked, his voice deep and kind. "Can I come in?"

"Of course." I sat up straight, reeling back my emotions as Wilson opened the door.

"Guy is readying your vehicle for the trip. He asked you not to wait up for him."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes at Guy's insistence, but I nodded instead. Wilson came in and took a seat next to me on the bed. He looked down at the picture I held in my lap as I caressed the paper around my family's warm faces. We both sat in silence, gazing at the photograph, the sadness of the moment thick and melancholy. I flipped it over and slid it beneath the pillow, turning to Wilson.

"Wilson, will you always stay here by yourself?" Hope squeezed my chest that I would someday see him again. Wilson chuckled, rubbing his chin in thought.

"They'd have to drag my dead body from this house. I'll never leave. The only way I'll go down is with a fight." I smiled at his stubbornness and my heart swelled inside my chest.

"I don't know what I'm going to do without you." I played with the hem of my shirt, my fingers shaking.

"You'll do fine, Ruby." Wilson patted me on the back. "You're a strong vampire and you will go far in whatever you choose to pursue."

"But what if they don't accept me? Where would I go?"

Wilson shifted toward me on the bed. "Don't worry. You'll be accepted. Like I said, keep your head down and ask for Pandora, an old friend of mine. She will guide you in your new life and answer any questions you may have. But you will need to be careful in letting her know about me. I'm not very well liked in the city of Tombstone. You need some sort of code word only she would understand…" Wilson rubbed his temples and after a moment said, "Nora."

I spiked a brow in question at his former lover's name.

"Yes." He nodded as if confirming his own thoughts. "That will do. Tell her *Nora* and she will understand."

Wilson's kind words seeped out of him and into me, his comfort and acceptance thick and certain. I nodded and looked up into the old vampires

eyes and saw my reflection there.

My heart was breaking at the thought of it being our last night together, my journey so far flashing through my mind like the pages of a picture book. I thought of how far I'd come in just a few short days, the ups and downs, my training, and most of all, Guy. My heart threatened to explode at the onslaught of emotions and memories.

"I'm gonna miss you, Wilson." I glanced up at my mentor, holding back the burn that threatened to cause tears. I would not cry.

"I'm going to miss you too, Ruby. I wish I could've done more for you, had more time." Wilson smiled warmly and placed his hand over mine. "But there's one piece of advice I can give: never dwell on the past, only look to the future. You will have many decisions to make and obstacles to conquer, but I can tell you this in all honesty, Ruby Carter, you will be great."

My heart fluttered warmly. "Thanks Wilson. I couldn't have done any of this without you. Or Guy. I owe you everything."

"Don't thank me." Wilson pointed at me, whispering. "It is *you* I should be thanking."

I turned my focus on him, wondering whatever I could have done to earn his gratitude. As if knowing what I was thinking, Wilson answered.

"I've been alone for a long time." His expression was dreamy, far away. "I'd almost forgotten what life was all about. Living here in fear, letting my doubts get the better of me. I'd almost forgotten what happiness was." He turned to me. "And you've made me remember. Like a ray of sunshine, you made me remember what it was like to laugh again, to enjoy myself. I will miss our time together."

Happiness settled within me like the glowing candles on a birthday cake and my lips curled into a smile. I grabbed Wilson's hand and squeezed it, hoping that when the time came and I was accepted into Tombstone there were others there like Wilson. People I could call my family. People I would come to care about and trust. But I knew I'd never meet another quite like the old vampire.

"All right, young one." Wilson pushed up from the bed. "Tomorrow night is a big night and you need your rest."

I nodded, laying down and covering myself up. Wilson flicked off the light and stood in the doorway for a few moments. "Remember, Ruby. Don't dwell on the past, only look to the future."

I nodded. "I will, Wilson. Goodnight." He closed the door and I snuggled into the blankets, my mind a flurry of thoughts about the days to come. As if I hadn't realized it before— which I had many times, over and over— one thought kept breaking through my mind.

I would never be a human again.

THIRTY-TWO: RUBY

Tap. Tap. Tap.

I was startled by something dripping on my forehead. I blinked the cold liquid away from my eyes, lifting my lashes to reveal a rain-drenched world of wrecked metal and flashing lights.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Water seeped through the broken windshield, trickling down my face.

The smell of gasoline pinged my nose. I coughed and sputtered, spitting water from my mouth and, like a thousand razor blades slicing my skin, pain tore through my body, my chest tight and breathless.

I tried to sit up, to move, but was pinned. I tried to call out for help but it was as if my mind and body weren't connected. All I could do was lay there, weak with agony.

Time became irrelevant as I faded in and out of consciousness, the pain too much to endure. But through the blackness consuming my mind, I vaguely remember the sound of grating metal, moaning with release. I remember the steel which encased me, shifting, wrenching pain through me as though tearing me limb from limb. I cried out as cold hands slid beneath me, lifting me from my metal tomb. I floated as if on air from the wreck out into the open, moonlight shining through branches of a tree. Headlights marred my vision, flashing yellow and black against the trunk of a tree.

Cold arms wrapped around me, holding me tight. But, strangely, those arms morphed into the warmth of cotton sheets and blankets. A pillow and—*No, wait!*

Awareness hit like a brick wall. I was dreaming. My eyes shifted beneath my lids, threatening to open. I felt myself in bed.

No. No. No! I squeezed my eyes tight, fighting wakefulness. Fighting to stay in the dream, wanting to see my maker. I tried what Wilson taught me and relaxed my mind, letting myself sink back into the memory, sink into the darkness and haze of the crash site.

Cold arms wrapped around me, holding me tight. Strong, strong arms.

Yes, that's it! The moment I've been straining to remember!

But my weakened eyes would not open to reveal who held me, my lids so heavy. My body, numb and cold.

I was dying, the life draining quickly from my body, my spirit fading

away. But I knew there was something I needed to do, something I needed to find out.

Unfortunately, I was unable to focus my mind, the thought fleeing as soon as it came. Darkness called to me, tempting and inviting. I struggled against it, struggled to breathe, to live. But the fingers of mortality wrapped around my heart like a metal cinch, squeezing, compressing. Before I succumbed to death's dark summon, I lifted my lashes one last time, startled by a pair of eyes, soft brown eyes looking down at me. They were familiar, kind eyes. Before I knew what to think, my gaze hooded and the scene before me faded to blackness. Numbness. Nothing.

Reality slammed into my brain again, my eyes pelting open to see the cluttered room in which I slept. I shot up clasping my chest, my breath ragged.

"Dang it!" I punched the bed in frustration over losing the dream. Guy mumbled, shifting on his pallet on the floor. I froze, clamping my mouth shut, not wanting to wake him, my heart thudding so loud I was certain he could hear it. But to my relief, he rolled over, once again eliciting the soft breaths of sleep. I released a long sigh, but inwardly cursed my own mind.

Why couldn't I have held on for one more minute, one more second so I could remember my maker? I remembered the eyes I saw in my dream and how they felt familiar somehow, comforting. I strained to focus on those eyes, to see who held me in their cold arms. But alas, the memory waned like the eclipse of the moon, the coldness of the small room replacing its presence, pebbling my flesh.

I rubbed my arms, feeling strange in my own skin, unease creeping over me like wriggling maggots. I wanted to either remember my maker or completely forget all about it. My taunting dreams frustrated me, and I just wanted to get away from them, get away from the anguish over my impending trip— only hours away now. I wanted to get out of my own head, if only for a little while.

Though I realized it was a risky move, I needed some air. I rose and, even before Wilson awoke, left the old ranch house, unlocking each bolt of the front door with care. I scurried down the long drive toward town, into the dusky twilight haze.

I headed toward town, thinking maybe I'd get a gift for the two men in my life. They'd done so much for me and I needed to repay their kindness. And it'd be a great opportunity to clear my head anyway.

I'd grown up only a couple hours from Tucson and had gone there on many day trips with my mother. I was familiar with the town's grid-like streets and the shopping hotspots, so I sped myself to town like lightning, wanting to get there and back before Wilson and Guy woke up. I wondered what the heck a Captain of FUSE and a two hundred year old vampire could possibly want or need.

I found myself downtown on the old roads, the streetcar rolling by the

crumbling adobe buildings. I inhaled the smell of funnel cakes and restaurant food, thick and savory. Now that I knew I was a hybrid, I wondered whether I could enjoy the delicacy of food, but my stomach rumbled in protest. Ever since turning and drinking the other vampire's blood, I hadn't much of an appetite.

Crowds of people filtered in and out of bars and clubs, the bells on the doors of little shops ringing happily with busy customers. If only for a minute, I forgot I was no longer human, enjoying so much the bustling city.

I stopped at the corner of Fourth and Sixth where a group of onlookers watched a lone man strumming his guitar. The case was open on the ground for tips. I stood to the side, listening to the tinny melody and wrapped my arms around myself, contented. Aside from when I was with Guy, I felt alive for the first time in… well, it felt like forever, and I was happily distracted from my dark thoughts and haunting memories.

There I stood amongst the living, enjoying a Friday night stroll. The lights of the city twinkled overhead and the sounds of music wrapped me in a blanket of merriment. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew what I'd done was wrong; I shouldn't have left the safety of the ranch house. I knew being out on the town, mingling with humans was a dangerous plot but I couldn't stop from getting sucked into the lively atmosphere. It would be one of the last times I could enjoy such a luxury.

The man finished his tune and the crowd applauded before moving on to the next store or attraction. A stray cat meandered over to the man and he leaned down to scrub its mangy fur. I pondered leaving a tip, but realized I had no money. And then it struck me.

What was I doing here anyway? How had I been so stupid? I couldn't very well buy the men a gift with no money, and I'd never stolen a thing in my entire life. Except for that lip gloss when I was fourteen, but hey, who was counting?

The whole trip had been in vain. I sighed in frustration, accepting that I needed to get back to Wilson's quickly. The guys would be more than angry if they found me gone when they woke.

I gave the man and his cat friend one last glance before I bolted, only to find myself stunned, my teeth jamming together painfully. I blinked, seeing I'd plowed right into a tall metal parking meter. The strength of my body broke the thing from its base, the bolts pulled from the ground and the meter slammed to the pavement with a loud metallic bang. The impact did not go unnoticed, the echo resonating through the streets as well as vibrating through my body.

I stopped, frozen by my stupidity and realizing in my haste, I'd forgotten to control my ability. The cat bolted. The lone musician and a group of straggling pedestrians stopped to see what had happened. My first reaction was to speed away, but that would draw even more unwanted attention, so I backed up a few paces, slowly. I turned around, only to catch the glower of a

group of patrolling soldiers and a man in a black coat. FUSE soldiers, of course, as the patches on their uniforms indicated. *Oh, crap.*

The men were stationed right across the street at the next corner, in front of a smoke shop. Their suspicious gazes glued to me and they spoke in hushed tones. I could not see the face of the man in black; it was hidden underneath a hood. But the soldiers' foreheads were clearly lined with concern and I caught the word "unfortunate" in their quiet conversation. My heart threatened to pound out of my chest as I wondered if they were talking about me.

I smiled, acting as though nothing in the world was wrong, and walked myself as humanly as possible in the opposite direction.

Breathe. Just breathe. Act normal.

I concentrated on moving one foot after another, my arms swinging languid at my sides, yet I couldn't shake the lingering soldiers' presence. I wondered if they were following me but didn't dare look back, knowing that would appear suspicious and incriminating. I inhaled through my nose and exhaled from my mouth, hoping I would get away unnoticed.

I made a sharp turn down the next street, keeping myself in the dark shadows. I dared a peek behind me and, sure enough, the three soldiers and the man in black came trailing around the corner after me. I took in my surroundings and noted that I now walked through a residential area, the street vacant except for my pursuers and me. I quickened my pace, realizing I was in *big* trouble. I focused my senses behind me and the swifter my pace became, the faster the soldier's boots followed. They were gaining on me.

The only option to get away now was to use my lightning speed ability. Before giving another second's consideration, I sped away in a flash.

My heart pounded and my breath quickened as the city lights sped by me. I wove in and out of backstreets and alleys, avoiding heavily populated areas. Dogs barked and cars whizzed by, but I kept my mind on staying as far away from the trouble I'd caused as possible. God, Guy would kill me if he found out. And Wilson? I could almost imagine his fatherly scorn and his wagging finger. Jeez, I was such an idiot.

I flew past a group of dumpsters behind an old warehouse, my breath hitching in surprise as the man in black leapt through the air toward me, his growl fierce and terrifying. I didn't even have time to wonder how he'd caught up to me so quickly before I was ducking and rolling across the ground to avoid his impact. I glanced around and saw he was alone, the soldiers nowhere in sight. Who was this man?

Fear tore through me as I bolted away again, mounting a tall brick wall with surprising ease. I flew across the wall and leapt to the top of a flat roof. I didn't have time to admire my ability to jump so high, but let my body react by instinct, huffing and puffing as I scaled from rooftop to rooftop. I figured I could avoid the man in black if I kept up high and out of reach. But just when I assumed I'd gotten away, I sensed a dark presence behind me. I spun to see the black-hooded stranger yet again, eye to eye with me on the rooftop. Dang.

He flew at me, his face cloaked in darkness, his muscular form tense and ready to attack.

Who the hell was this guy? There's no way he was human, from the speed and agility he displayed. Was he a vampire? No, I would've smelled that unmistakable banana pudding scent on him. He definitely had a smell about him, dingy and muddy, though I couldn't place it.

Once again, I shifted my position just in time to avoid his attack. I threw myself from the roof and landed with a deafening boom in the parking lot of a Wal-Mart Supercenter, the large blue sign casting an eerie glow across the scenery. I looked down to see my feet had made large divots in the pavement and glanced up to see shoppers screaming at my unearthly arrival. People abandoned their shopping carts and scattered, disappearing into the night.

My dark pursuer joined me, landing a few paces in front of me in a standoff position, his curved back hunched forward, and his abnormally large legs were bent. His heaving form rose and fell with exasperated breathing.

"You gonna keep this up all night?" I asked, holding myself in a fight-ready position. "Or am I going to have to kill you right now?" Of course, I was bluffing. First off, I had no idea what this man or thing was. And second, I had no idea how to kill it.

The stranger did not answer, but his head twitched to the side before he pounced. I dodged him and flashed away into the night, begging my legs to carry me faster than they ever had before. My mind whirled, my heart pounded, and the need to get away was suffocating in itself. Somehow, I had to get back to Guy and Wilson but I could not lead this beast straight to their door. And that thought led me to more questions.

Not only did I wonder what the hell was following me, but *how* it was following me. He must sense me somehow, like the night at the mission how that dreadful vampire found me and Guy. But this was not a vampire, I was sure of it. Maybe a werewolf? I wasn't certain, but it was the only logical guess I had. And if this cloaked stranger was indeed a wolf, then it would make sense he was following me by sense of smell. I knew what I had to do.

I pushed my aching legs even faster, jetting toward the east side of town. My pursuer grew more distant, but I hadn't lost him yet because I sensed him just out of sight. I halted when arriving at a long row of businesses, my attention flickering from store to store. Restaurant. Laundry mat. Restaurant. Salon. Restaurant. Morgue.

Crap. I had two logical choices: a restaurant where I could hide my scent amongst the aroma of cooking food, or the morgue, where my smell might be masked by the odor of dead bodies. The restaurants were jammed with hungry customers and I would have a tough time avoiding attention there. On the other hand, the morgue had been shut down for the day and was dark and seemingly vacant. That was my answer then, the morgue.

I leaped across the street, sensing the werewolf's presence gaining on me like a looming shadow of darkness. Terrified, I circled the building and found

the back door locked. I focused, grasping the handle tightly. I pulled with all of my might and it burst open, the lock breaking under the pressure. I scrambled inside and shut the door behind me, finding a deadbolt at the top. Just my luck. I locked it and found a heavy table off to the side. I pushed it against the door and then turned to face the room, panting.

The morgue was cold and frigid, as though encapsulated in ice and narrow silver drawers marked with names of the deceased covered the walls. The room I'd entered was the one where the bodies were kept. I shivered with dread.

An eerie silence seeped through the place and I couldn't help feeling like I wasn't alone. But I reassured myself I *was* alone, the people there dead and no longer of this world— kinda like I should've been just a few nights ago before someone infected me with vampirism. I shook away my random thoughts and slid beneath a wooden desk, wrapping my arms around my knees. I would have to wait it out and pray the werewolf would lose my scent. I resisted the urge to nervously laugh aloud, to laugh at the stupidity of my actions and the irony of my situation.

Here I was on a Friday night, a vampire hiding amongst the dead, running from a werewolf and, once again putting my life in danger. I shook my head, knowing it was all my fault. I should've stayed at the ranch house and ignored the urge to go to town, but I tried to justify my decision because it was my last night before beginning my new life— a life I wasn't sure I'd even like, at that. Maybe it had been cold feet or a last-ditch effort to feel alive again, a last effort to embrace freedom, but either way, I'd made a huge mistake leaving Guy and Wilson.

I leaned my head back against the solid wood, my breath slowing to even pants. I could only imagine the look on Wilson and Guy's face when I came traipsing in from a romp around town, and I was pretty certain they'd be awake by now, wondering where the heck I was. I shifted my attention to the door, hearing only silence and the beat of my own heart.

Right when my hope solidified that I'd lost the werewolf, the door burst open and the table went flying. The cloaked man stood over me, heaving, and I was pretty sure I'd have to check my pants when, and if, I found myself out of this situation. I looked at my pursuer, finally seeing his hands, or paws rather, and fear crashed through me like a vase shattering against a wall.

I was right in my suspicion, he was a werewolf, but not fully transformed. He looked like a strange human mutation of a wolf, the flesh on his long face still pink, his features similar to a human's. But fur covered his hands and long sharp claws extended from his fingers. They splayed out, ready for a fight. A fight to the death.

THIRTY-THREE: GUY

I woke abruptly, my body being shaken.

"She's gone!"

I blinked my confused eyes open and squirmed beneath Wilson's strong grasp. He knelt over me on the floor, his strained face red as blood.

"God damn it, wake up. She's gone!"

"What?" I sat up, rubbing the grit from my eyes. The world came blaringly into focus.

"Ruby!" Wilson growled. "You let her escape!"

Fear tore through my chest as my gaze flashed to the empty bed beside me, the covers rumpled and askew. I shot to my feet and scoured the room, flinging open the closet door, checking the covers and beneath the bed. When I found no sign of her in our room I rushed to the bathroom, the living room, the kitchen, Wilson tight on my heels.

"It's no good searching. She's gone." Wilson's voiced mirrored the dread I felt inside.

"No. She's got to be here somewhere." I ran back through the house, stopping at the red door— the one that was perpetually locked, the room I'd never been allowed to enter. I jiggled the handle and when that didn't work, I slammed my body into it, knocking myself to the ground. I jumped to my feet and tried again. Wilson placed a hand on my shoulder to stop me but I shrugged him off.

"Let me in there Wilson." Fury grew inside of me like the hot rays of a mid-day sun. "She could be in there."

"She's not in there. She left."

I stopped cold and turned to the old vampire. "How do you know?" My chest heaved with panting breath. "How do you know she's not outside, breaking spoons?" I started to run to the back door and search the property, but Wilson grabbed my arm and held me in place. I glared daggers at him.

"I played back the security camera," he explained and his voice had a dark finality to it. "She left hours ago."

"Show me." Disbelief that Ruby would leave when we were so close to Tombstone rattled my brain. "Show me the tape."

Wilson stared at me with frustration and sadness combined.

"Wilson!" I barked. "Show me the damned tape!"

He considered me for a moment longer. I'm sure he could see my body trembling with adrenaline for I could feel it like a cyclone. I couldn't believe neither one of us had seen her go. She'd disappeared just like that. Wilson's chest expanded with a deep breath before he pulled a key from his pocket. He slid it into the lock and opened the red door.

I burst into the room, taking notice of the walls. Walls and walls of electronics. Cameras, TVs, computers, maps. Wires everywhere. Wilson had always been privy to the happenings around town before anyone else. And this was why. He had his own intelligence office, comparable to the FBI, right here in the ranch house. But I didn't care. All I cared about was getting Ruby back. That headstrong girl, she'd likely get herself killed before she'd be able to join the others.

"Show me." My head swiveled back and forth, looking for the right screen. "Where?"

"Here." Wilson sat in front of a large screen, hooked up to a keyboard. He clicked at the keys, an image flashing upon the screen. It was a shot of Wilson's front driveway. A blur of long white hair and quick legs flashed by.

"That was her?" It'd been so quick, I wasn't sure if it was my eyes playing tricks on me. But Wilson nodded. My chest tightened, panic stricken. "Where did she go?"

Wilson shook his head. "How should I know? She could be in Mexico now for all I'm aware."

My anger flared and I clenched my fists. "How do you not know? You know everything Wilson! How do you not know this?"

Wilson shot to his feet, his face mere inches from mine, fangs bared. "Don't yell at me as though this were my fault!"

My heart pounded, threatening to explode in my chest. I glared at the old vampire with a young man's façade. Just the sight of him enraged me. "You're the surveillance expert here. And you said so yourself, you hardly ever sleep. How did you not notice her leaving? Shouldn't you have used your… your superhero vampire abilities to sense her or something?"

I scowled at him, my temper rising. He was a two-hundred year old vampire with extraordinary vision and hearing. I was only human after all. He should've sensed her leaving.

Wilson's nostrils flared, his voice dangerously low. "You were the one who brought her here. She was *your* charge. *Your* responsibility. You slept in the same room as her. It is *you* who should've been keeping a closer eye on her."

I let a low growl escape my lips, realizing he had a point. Ruby was in my care and I was the one who had made the decision to take her in the first place. After a long stare-off with Wilson, I dropped my shoulders, defeated. *Damn it*. Why were old people always right?

"You're right," I breathed, combing my fingers through my hair in resignation. "I should've been more careful. It's just… I thought by now…"

What did I think? Maybe I'd thought she was trustworthy, that she'd proven to be more than just some irrational bloodsucker. But facts were facts. She was a Newborn vampire and Newborns were always unpredictable, no matter how human they seemed.

I sank into a rolling computer chair and leaned back against the headrest. Wilson sat down next to me and folded his fingers together on the desk, leaning his chin atop of them.

"I'm sorry, as well. I should've sensed her. I should've known. I hardly sleep anymore and normally would've jumped at a butterfly's wing but with the rigorous training we've been undertaking and in my old age… I…"

Our eyes met, and it was strange. In that moment it was like we understood each other for the first time, like an unspoken truce, an agreement. We'd never been friends before, just two people with a common problem that had brought us together in the most unlikely of circumstances— solely business. But now we had a common goal, to get Ruby back. And we both knew it.

"You go and search for her and I'll stay in case she comes back." Wilson suggested.

"That's exactly what I was thinking."

I moved to stand, but Wilson lifted a hand, stopping me. "If by some miracle you find her out there, don't come back. Take her straight to Tombstone."

I nodded in agreement. And without another word, Wilson stood and made himself busy, flipping open laptops and clicking through keyboards. I ran to the guest room, gathering my pack of supplies. I laced up my combat boots and strapped my gun to my hip. I threw my bag over my shoulder and headed back through the house, passing the red door where Wilson was checking on surveillance footage. I couldn't help but be highly aware that this could possibly be the last time I would ever see Wilson. I stopped and peered through the door.

"Wilson." I steeled myself for my next words, and forced them out in a quiet voice. "In case I never said so before… thank you. For everything."

Wilson paused and looked over his shoulder. He smiled, but said nothing in reply. We didn't have to say what would happen after this, it was common sense. We would take our separate paths and never look back, trying to forget about our time together. Wilson turned back to his work and I bolted toward the front door, praying I could once again find Ruby. I needed to get her home.

THIRTY-FOUR: RUBY

My pulse raced, my face draining of color. I found myself staring up into the yellow, glowing eyes of the werewolf who'd been chasing me through town ever since I'd left Wilson's house. He hadn't fully transformed yet, still having the form of a half-man half-wolf. But he was terrifying nonetheless.

I found myself wishing I'd done things differently, wishing I'd made better choices. But then again, what good was another chance at life if I couldn't enjoy the pleasures the world had to offer? I wondered if this would be the status of my life from now on— fleeing, running, hiding, fighting to survive. But regardless of my inane thoughts on the future, that's exactly what I must do now, fight for my life.

The werewolf's chest rose and fell quickly with huffing breaths, his legs crouched; a beast ready to strike. I knew he wouldn't give up until I was dead or in custody, his ferocious stare offering nothing along the lines of forgiveness. It was obvious the wolf worked for FUSE, for the red Ankh glared out at me from a patch on his dark-hooded sweater.

He saw me there, beneath the desk, peering out at him like a scared bunny. He could smell my fear; it coaxed him on like a rabid animal. He inched closer and closer, reveling in the fact that I was trapped. I pressed my hands into the wood above me and closed my eyes, thinking this was my last chance to prove, not only to myself, but to Wilson and Guy that I could control and conquer my abilities, despite the idiotic choices I'd made so far.

The wolf growled as he surged in, the air of his movements rushing toward me, sweeping my face in a smell of wet dirt and dander. But I banished my fear—as well as the stench from the wolf— clearing my mind to focus on my strength. And as the werewolf dove in, I pushed hard against the heavy desk, causing it to fly forward. It crushed him against the wall, eliciting a canine yelp, and not a moment later, silence permeated the room. I knew then that I'd knocked him out.

I climbed from the floor and stood over the unconscious wolf-man, my hands trembling violently. "Whoa." Shock poured through me that I'd defeated the beast, and I struggled to take a breath. And then it occurred to me that he might wake up, and I sure as heck didn't want to be standing there when he did. Anxiety coursed through me, but I willed my body to move and bounded out the back door and into the night.

I found myself on the long stretch of highway toward Wilson's house weaving in and out of darkness and desert. I lagged, my strength weakening and my breath growing heavy. My lungs burned and my muscles cramped. I didn't know how much more I could take but, thankfully, I no longer sensed the presence of the black-cloaked werewolf, so when I saw the dirt drive leading to Wilson's desolate property, I raced up it with haste.

At the first sight of the old ranch house and its pink-painted door, I breathed a sigh of relief, my body turning to Jell-O. I burst through the door to find Guy racing toward me like Rambo, his pack on his back and weapons at his side. He was in shock at the sight of me and came to a skidding halt. I needed to explain, to say something, yet I could barely speak from the heavy pressure in my chest. I stopped in the front entry, the door lying opened behind me, and braced my hands on my knees. I panted and coughed, my body sagging forward.

"Where the hell were you?" Guy growled in frustration, his grey eyes narrowing on me.

I was spared the need to reply when Wilson flew into the room, his face twisting and turning with emotion before it landed on a scolding-father expression. He considered me, shaking his head. "Has nothing I've taught you about safety sunk into that pretty blonde head of yours? What were you thinking?"

"I… I…" I couldn't catch my breath. Even if I'd been able to, I wouldn't have known where to start my explanation. A strong breeze followed me through the front door accompanied by a black blur.

"Werewolf." The word barely left Guy's lips before I spun to meet my pursuer's attack. Damn, I thought I'd knocked him out.

We flew from the ground in a tangle of legs and arms and fangs and fur. His form had shifted from a man into a large-scale black wolf, his clothes ripping from his body as he expanded in midair. He grabbed me by the neck and we landed hard on the tile, crushing the floor to pieces. I gazed up at the terrifying beast looming atop me, struggling to free myself from his grasp, but I was pinned solid. His sharp teeth frothed with saliva, his jaw quivered, and his yellow irises glowed as if producing their own light source. I was hardly able to move, for his strength nearly matched my own.

I growled and gave one last attempt to free myself, surprised when I was able to flip my attacker on his back. Before I could think what to do next, a piercing shot rang out, causing the wolf to go limp beneath me. I jumped away and turned to see Guy holding a gun pointed at the beast's chest.

"Oh, my God," I breathed. Guy unloaded at least five more shots into the wolf, each one jerking the furry body on the ground, the concussion vibrating through my ears. The werewolf morphed, his fur receding into the skin of a man, his naked body lying bloodied on the floor.

I released a sob and brought my hands to cover my mouth. My heart throbbed and my numb legs wobbled.

“Did anyone else follow you?” Guy demanded of me, but I vaguely heard him beyond the confusion in my brain. My vision darkened, the room threatening to turn black. I leaned against the wall, bracing myself. “Did anyone else follow you?” Guy said louder this time, snapping me from my shocked haze.

“I… I don’t think so.” My voice sounded distant and far away, as if in a dream as I stood enveloped in my own stupefaction.

“Good.” But the relief in Guy’s voice was hollow as he slid his weapon back into his belt and gave the man’s lifeless body a hard kick.

“What have I told you Ruby?” Wilson scolded, drawing my eyes up. He closed the front door and bolted it ten times with different sized and shaped locks. He rounded on me, his jaw clenched tight. “You know better than to go into the city. And by yourself, no less.” He huffed and steadied himself against the back of his recliner, as though he was about to have a heart attack. He let out an exasperated breath. “You could’ve gotten yourself killed!”

“I know. I’m sorry.” My voice shook as I sat on the nearby sofa. “I wanted to do something nice for you. I wanted to get you both… a gift.” Saying it out loud sounded silly, ridiculous. I hung my head in shame.

“A gift?” Guy released a scoff, making me feel worse than I already did. “A gift to us, would’ve been to stay put. To obey your orders and not go prancing into the city like some hormone-driven teenager.”

My temper flared at Guy’s condescendence and I couldn’t help the fury that welled inside of me like a pool of molten lava. I stood abruptly and planted an angry foot on the ground.

“You’re right, I am a teenager. A teenager who just realized her entire life has changed, for-*ever*. A teenager who’s lost everything.” I took a step forward, closing in on him. “And what are you?” I asked with malice, directing a cold gaze his way. “You’ve never even told me how old you are. What? Twenty? Twenty-one? Nothing more than a child yourself, an angry boy-soldier that has been given too much power for his own good.” He gazed at me with shock, but I didn’t care. He would never understand how I felt, how it felt to be immortal.

“Enough!” Wilson’s voice boomed through me, louder than I’d ever heard it, and Guy and I stood frozen as the vampire’s eyes flicked between us. “Save the lover’s quarrel for another time.” He crossed the room, and pulled me to sit with him on the sofa, laying a gentle hand on my leg, calming my nerves. His voice softened. “I have no need for material things, Ruby. Only peace of mind that you’re safe is enough for me. Now please, tell me what happened.”

I met Guy’s eyes, guilt flooding through me for the way I spoke to him. Regret filled his face as well, but he said nothing and dropped his gaze to the werewolf man on the floor. He sank down to the pile of torn clothes and rifled through his jeans pockets. I looked away, trying to clear my thoughts.

“FUSE.” The word came out of my mouth as a whisper.

Guy stood up with the man-wolf's wallet in his hand and looked at me in fear. "You ran into FUSE soldiers?"

I nodded, biting my bottom lip. "They were patrolling Fourth Avenue. They followed me, along with… with that thing." I gestured to the dead werewolf, but kept my eyes averted away from the bloody mess. Guy and Wilson exchanged worried glances.

"But it's okay," I breathed. "I lost them. *He* was the only one that followed me."

"You said he was with FUSE soldiers?" Wilson shot to his feet.

"Yes. Why?" I asked, feeling like there was much more trouble to this situation I wasn't yet privy too.

"Oh, this is not good." Wilson paced, his brows furrowed. "Not good at all. I need to check surveillance." He darted off to the back hallway and closed himself behind the red door.

"What's wrong?" I asked Guy, worry flooding through my body. "What does he mean?"

"Yep." Withdrawing his hand from the wallet, Guy shook his head. "Found it." He held a small silver rectangle the size of a peanut in the palm of his hand.

"What? What is it?"

Guy's expression turned dark, and I knew I'd really messed up. He threw the little piece of metal to the ground and crushed it beneath his combat boot. He looked at me, clenched his jaw, and then sighed.

"In rare instances FUSE will create a plea bargain with an Unfortunate Soul. They agree to work for FUSE and FUSE spares their life." I frowned, still not fully understanding what was going on.

"That was a tracking device." Guy pointed beneath his boot. "And this werewolf was their tracker."

"Oh no." The severity of the situation finally sunk in. If that was a tracking device, then FUSE knew where I'd escaped to. Here, at Wilson's house.

"Oh no, is right." Guy paced, rubbing his scruffy chin in his hands. His storm cloud eyes took me in. "You'd better hope they didn't get an accurate read or…"

"They've found us!" Wilson yelled, bolting through the red door and into the living room. "FUSE is here!"

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out except a soft cry. Panic washed over me.

Guy pulled his gun from his belt and quickly reloaded it. Wilson flashed from room to room, closing windows and shades and bolting doors. A loud bang resonated at the front door. Someone was trying to break it down.

"Time to go." Guy yanked my arm, dragging me across the room toward the back door.

I glanced back to see Wilson sinking into his leather recliner and taking a

deep breath, like one would after a long day at work. I furrowed my brows but my confusion was interrupted by a loud slam at the front door, sounding like the force of at least four men put together on the other side.

"Ruby. Now." Guy tugged at me, but I halted, my eyes lingering on my teacher, wondering why he was sitting so calmly when we were about to be raided.

"Wilson!" I cried out, an ugly sound. "Come with us!"

Wilson looked at me, not with anger but with sadness. His dark eyes glistened with the flames of the fire. "It's too late."

"No!" My heart pounded loud in my ears. "Come with us. We can get away!"

Wilson shook his head and another loud bang erupted from the soldiers trying to get in. "If I go with you, they'll track us down, just like they did you. If I stay, I can stall them enough for you two to get away."

I desperately looked to Guy to see what he thought about Wilson's preposterous notion, but he just nodded in agreement.

Another bang sounded out, this time half the bolts on the door bursting off, leaving only a few hanging on. My mouth opened as if to argue, but I realized it would be in vain. Wilson was, if anything, stubborn as an ox. I shook my head in disbelief as Guy leaned over and shook Wilson's hand. The two men smiled at each other. It was a sad, knowing smile.

"But Wilson…" Unshed tears marred my vision, making it hard to see. My hands shook. "Please…"

Wilson stood and squared my shoulders to him. "It's okay, Ruby. I'm two hundred years old and stronger than I look. I can hold my own. I'll be fine."

"B…but…" I stuttered. *No. No. No*. This was all my fault. I couldn't stand by and let Wilson take the heat for the problem I had created. It wasn't fair.

Wilson jerked my body with his strong hands, his brown eyes boring into mine. "Stand up straight, girl." I obeyed, pulling up my shoulders, trying to hold back my tears. He considered me for one long moment and his stern facade softened when he spoke, words I feared would be the last I'd ever hear from him.

"Go now, Ruby Carter. Just remember what I said before. Don't dwell on the past, only look to the future. You will be the greatest vampire the world has ever seen. There's no mistaking it."

Another loud bang nearly ripped the door from its hinges, but Guy had me out the back door before the soldiers could burst through. Without another thought and, as if by instinct, I grabbed Guy and whisked us both out into the darkness of night. In a flash, we came to the chain link fence at the end of the property. I stopped dead.

"My picture." I gasped, remembering I'd left it in the room underneath my pillow.

"Your what?" But before the words fully left Guy's mouth, I raced back to the house and rounded the back to our bedroom window. Probably another idiotic move on my part, but I didn't care. That picture was the one thing, the *only* thing I had from my past.

Luckily, that side of the structure was clear. I broke through the window of our room and darted inside, swiping the picture from beneath the pillow. But when I turned to leave, I was startled by the presence of a soldier. I gasped in spite of myself as his hefty form filled the entirety of the windowpane, blocking me in. I recognized him from the incident downtown. He was the FUSE soldier with the werewolf.

He smiled as he held a gun to my head, no doubt loaded with silver bullets. "Where do you think you're going, little vamp? Don't you want to stay and play?"

I blinked, feeling the cold steel pressing into my skull. But as I looked up at the man, his smile changed, turning into a wide open 'O'. Slowly as if underwater, his body shook and jolted in reaction to the gunshots. He slid to the floor.

Gasping for air, I turned to see Wilson standing behind me hefting a large piece of artillery in his arms. The old vampire gave me a reprimanding look, but his line of sight traveled down to the picture in my hands. He said nothing but nodded toward the window, insinuating my escape. I slid Wilson one last glance before scaling the soldier's slumped form beneath the window. I blew through the opening, glass shards shattering with me as I went.

Yet again, I wanted to urge Wilson to come with us. I wanted to help save him from the attack, but I knew he wouldn't come. This time, I didn't stop. I raced back to the end of the property where I'd left Guy standing, dumbfounded and angry that he had lost me again.

"Damn it, Faith."

Without warning, the house behind us erupted with a loud boom, the concussion of the explosion knocking us both to the ground. I peered through the trees to see a monstrous ball of fire escaping into the sky. A cloud of smoke mushroomed from the remains of what used to be Wilson's home. Horror filled my heart, constricting my chest.

"*Noooo!"* I crawled back toward the fire, desperation blazing through my blood.

But Guy held me in place, his arms around my waist as I flailed. I would normally be strong enough to rip from his grasp, but in my current emotional state, I couldn't move. I slumped in his arms, shock overtaking my body.

"Faith." Guy whispered in my ear. "Listen to me. You must calm down. You must focus. Look at me."

I released a soft sob and turned to look into my savior's grey eyes. My teary eyes blurred his features, but the steel in his gaze drew me in. He always had a way about him that calmed me, even in the most desperate of situations.

"You have to let go." Guy's voice was raspy, a sad sound. "We have to

let go."

"But Wilson." Tears broke free and my lips trembled. "He… he's in there."

Guy shook his head and if I wasn't mistaken, I thought I'd seen a misty gleam in his eyes. "We have two choices, Faith. We can stay here and be killed, or you can help us both escape to safety. What will it be?"

My chest heaved and a lump formed in my throat. I clasped the picture that had been the object of my desperate move and nodded.

"C'mon." Guy hefted me to my feet, keeping his arms wrapped around my middle. "Let's get the hell outta here."

THIRTY-FIVE: GUY

Wilson's sacrifice tore through my middle like a blunt sword and a collective sadness seemed to wash over the entire world in his absence. Nothing would be the same without him.

After the explosion, Ruby had convinced me to go back and look for Wilson, but the old vampire was nowhere to be seen, the only thing left was a pile of rubble and smoking ash. Luckily, the truck had been spared and we regretfully climbed in and left the non-existent ranch house for the last time.

The truck tires hummed across the freeway and the dim moonlight shone across the dashboard. I glanced to my side at Ruby. Neither one of us had said more than a few words since escaping from Wilson's ranch house, now destroyed. It was as though, if we didn't say it, it wasn't true. Wilson had died to save us, sacrificing himself so we could escape unharmed, and it had worked. Not only had he killed himself in a fiery explosion, along with all of his technology and worldly possessions, but he had blown up the remaining FUSE soldiers along with him as well.

And though Wilson and I always had a complicated relationship, a hollow pit opened in my stomach at his loss. He'd always been like that annoying older brother I'd never gotten along with, but knowing he was no longer of this world cast a deep shadow across my heart.

Ruby's violet eyes flickered across the rushing scenery, her hands lying flat in her lap. Through my bond, her sorrow flooded me, adding to my own. I'd watched how close the two had grown in our short time there and not only could I see the pain on her face but I could feel it in my heart.

Though it was hard for me to admit, I felt bad for her. Ever since the night I'd found her, her life had been full of traumas someone her age should never have known. Heck, I'd seen more in my lifetime than any twenty-year-old should. In that, we had something in common— a tortured life, a life of countless losses. And maybe that's why we were so deeply connected, a connection I could never claim to have had with anyone else. And from the way she looked at me at times, I knew she felt it too. It wasn't just the blood-bond I had to her, but something deeper. Something that came from the depths of our souls. The idea of parting from her that night made my insides ache.

Ruby sighed, her shoulders shaking with unspoken emotion. The closer we got to Tombstone, the more nervous she became. And with what had just

happened to Wilson, I wasn't sure now would be the best time to integrate her with the others. But regardless of my opinion on the matter, it had to be done. And it had to be done tonight.

"Can we stop, please?" She looked at me, her skin paler than usual. "I just… I need some fresh air."

I considered her for a moment, my focus shifting between her and the road. We were in a time crunch and should not risk stopping, but I heard the desperation in her voice and felt it in my bones. She was terrified.

At the next rest stop, I pulled from the freeway, stopping the truck in the empty parking lot next to a Ramada with stone benches. The moon cast a grey haze over everything, ethereal and dream-like. Ruby climbed out and walked into an open area of dirt. She stood there quietly, facing away from me. And then I felt it, like a gush of energy from her, a deep regret flooding her being. She blamed herself for what happened to Wilson, blamed herself for what I'd been put through, and blamed herself for her own death, the guilt crushing her like a mound of bricks.

A plastic bag was stuck in the tree next to her and it fluttered in the breeze. I steeled myself, stood up straight, and went to her, knowing I needed to be strong for her. I could not show my weakness, my sadness, at a time like this. I placed a hand on her arm, and was glad she didn't flinch.

"Don't blame yourself." I leaned into her ear. "It's not your fault."

She turned to me, her eyes wavering.

"How? If I'd never left, if I'd never…" Her words trailed off on the breeze. Her body trembled.

I wanted to pull her into my arms and offer her the comfort she deserved, yet I couldn't bring myself to do it. I opted for words of wisdom instead. "I know Wilson well enough to realize he'd not want you to mourn for him. He led a long and full life, more than once telling me he would accept death with open arms." Her downcast eyes lifted to mine, her thick lashes casting shadows on her cheeks. My chest quavered at the sight and I continued. "He was ready. And in the last moments of his life, you gave him a gift. The gift of happiness, happiness he hasn't known for many years."

She sniffled, the whisper of a smile crossing her lips. "He did tell me he wanted to go down fighting. That they'd have to drag his dead body out of his house."

I laughed. It sounded just like Wilson. "And that's exactly what you gave him, Faith, the fight of his life. He's okay and happy now. He's moved on. And now, so shall we."

She gazed down at her feet and kicked them into the dirt. She wore a pair of white tennis shoes I'd bought her the night I went to Lily's gravesite.

"You never told me." Her voice was dry and raw, laced with sorrow. "How did you meet Wilson? What happened between you two?"

I clenched my jaw, my past with Wilson not something I wanted to revisit. It was something I kept buried in the depths of my mind. But I owed it

to her. I owed it to Ruby to tell her everything. This would be the last time I'd ever see her and I felt the least I could do was tell her the truth. I crossed to the bench beneath the Ramada and sat, my elbows resting on my knees, hands clasped together. Ruby placed herself next to me and turned inward, her knees touching mine. She waited in silence for an explanation.

"I… " My words went dry and I felt like I had rocks in my mouth. I'd never told anyone about that time in my life, but I reeled myself back in, shoving away my angst. I cleared my throat and started over.

"After Lily was taken by a vampire a couple years ago, I lost it. I didn't sleep or eat. I searched for countless days and nights. My Sergeant committed me to a mental institution and I was drugged and restrained and didn't know which way was up. I'd started to believe them, that I was crazy." The wind ruffled my hair and touched the back of my neck, sending shivers over my body. I made myself continue.

"That's when General Brandt came to visit me— the general of FUSE. He told me I wasn't crazy after all, and confirmed everything I'd seen. He told me that vampires *did* exist and offered me a position within his army; he offered me revenge and safety. I agreed, hoping to one day find out what happened to her, find her kidnapper. I trained hard and was promoted quickly but the promises of revenge had been a lie. I was offered no help in my own cause, but was being used for the betterment of FUSE."

Ruby grazed her fingers along my arm, comforting me in my grim reverie. Except for the chirp of a distant cricket, the silence hung thick. Too thick. I inhaled deeply and continued.

"Not long after, I was visited one night by a vampire. A vampire who said he could help me."

"Wilson." Ruby whispered.

I nodded. "He said he could take me to Lily and help me save her. He said she was still alive." I glanced up. Ruby's brows furrowed with curiosity. I looked away, my chest constricting. "He wanted to help me because he'd been in a similar situation before. I had no other choice but to trust him. But when he took me there, to the coven where she had been held prisoner, it was too late."

"I'm so sorry," Ruby breathed. The sympathy in her voice pulled at me. I didn't want her to feel bad for me but I wanted to tell her the truth. I waved a dismissive hand. That had been a long time ago and I had finally let go, giving rest to my past.

"Was Wilson caught?" Her sweet voice broke through my hazy memory and I met her eyes. "Is that why he had been in hiding? Was he caught helping you?"

I nodded in agreement. "And in turn for his assistance, I helped him escape FUSE. I made it look like an accident. But because of his connection to me, he could not go back to Tombstone, his home. He was a traitor and would be killed. Therefore, I set him up there in Tucson to help him hide. I've

been keeping his secret all these years."

We both fell silent, letting the tragedy sink in. I thought of all of the moments leading me to this point, like flipping through a storybook. I didn't regret any of them and, especially now, I didn't regret saving Ruby.

"C'mon." I stood, drawing the last bit of will power I had within me to stay strong. I offered her my hand. "Sunrise isn't far off. We need to get you to your new home."

THIRTY-SIX: RUBY

My body was stiff, paralyzed by deep regret. Guy had been right, I blamed myself for everything that had happened thus far. I blamed myself for the position Guy had been put in by saving me, for the numerous times I'd put our lives in danger, and for dying in the first place, becoming the freak of nature that I was.

But most of all, I blamed myself for Wilson's death. He'd sacrificed himself for us and the thought made my heart drop to my stomach and then sink to my toes. But Guy's comforting words had helped, slightly. He was also right that Wilson would not want us to mourn over his loss. He would want us to go on. My mentor's words permeated my mind.

Don't dwell on the past, only look to the future. You will be the greatest vampire the world has ever seen. There's no mistaking it.

I swiped a tear from my cheek before Guy could notice. I'd done enough crying, I'd been sad for long enough. Now, it was time to look ahead and use my second chance at life for the better. I was alive after all, even if it was in the body of a hybrid vampire. Only, I wished that Guy could be there with me. Be there to see me through it.

The thought of leaving him spread through me like itchy spider webs, uncomfortable and wrong. But we had to separate and both of us knew it.

The ride had been silent since leaving the rest stop, since Guy finally revealed his true relationship with Wilson to me. Now I knew why there had been so much tension between them and for some reason, unwanted jealousy struck me over their closeness, as dysfunctional as it had been. I wanted that with Guy, some semblance of stability, a relationship, someone I could trust. I resorted to the fact that maybe I'd find acceptance in Tombstone, finally finding the family I so yearned for.

Guy lowered the volume of the radio and scanned the road. We didn't have long until we reached Tombstone, Arizona— the city of Unfortunate Souls. My stomach fluttered nervously, but I tried to keep calm. We rolled down highway 80 and I focused on the soft hum of the tires.

"I almost forgot." Guy broke the silence and reached into his pocket. "I got you something."

I regarded him suspiciously, wondering what on Earth could he have gotten me.

He held something in his fist while keeping his line of sight on the road. I met his hand with mine and he let the gift fall into my palm. I opened my fingers to find a rosary with beads of polished pearls and a wooden cross. I let it dangle from my fingers and gasped at its allure. Guy's warm kindness spread from my chest throughout my body.

"It's beautiful. Thank you."

Guy nodded but didn't reply.

I gazed at the gift, thoughts of something I'd heard long ago coming to mind. I creased my brows, curious. "Wait. Isn't there something about vampires and crucifixes? Will this hurt me?"

Guy chuckled for the first time in what felt like forever, as though everything was going to be okay. He cast his stormy gaze my way and smiled. "An old wives' tale. Put it on, if you want."

I draped the long, beaded necklace over my head and laid it against my chest, holding the cross between my fingers. It brought back a myriad of memories from my childhood, my past. Though my family had never been devout Catholics, we came from a long line of religious families and frequented Mass on holidays and special occasions. I smiled at the gift, being reminded of a rosary my Grandmother had given me on my thirteenth birthday.

"Where did you get this?" I asked in awe, rubbing the wood between my fingertips. The tip of the cross was pointy like a spike.

Guy turned on the blinker and it clicked quietly as he changed lanes. He peered into the rearview mirror. "I found it in the old abandoned mission the night you turned. I… I couldn't find the right time to give it to you."

I held it to my chest, cupping the present in my hands. "Now's perfect."

"I guess you could call it a late birthday gift." Guy spoke softly, keeping his eyes on the road. My heart swelled in my chest in realization as I gazed upon his profile. My next words came out breathless.

"You remembered…"

Surprisingly, Guy returned a radiant smile, pleased with my response to his present. After all we'd been through, here I'd thought my birthday had gone unnoticed in the hours of my transformation, but he'd remembered all the same. My heart threatened to explode with joy as I studied the lines of his face, trying to memorize the sharpness of his cheekbones and the scruff on his chin. I noted the way highway lights flickered over him, casting him into light and shadow, over and over again. It was like a dream I never wanted to wake up from, a dream where, for once in my life, I felt completely safe and happy. But the contentment would be ending in a matter of minutes, our time together coming to a close.

Guy glanced back into the rearview mirror, concern crossing his face. It sent a sudden shiver of dread through me.

"What's wrong?"

His gaze flickered from the mirror to the road and back again. He

stretched his neck to the side before speaking.

"There's been someone behind us since we left the rest stop."

Jeez, I hadn't noticed. I frowned warily. "Could it just be another driver on the road?"

His fingers grasped tightly to the wheel, his knuckles white. But his countenance belied his fear. He seemed calm and in control, but beneath it all I knew he was nervous.

"That's what I thought at first, but I'm not so sure now. We're going to take a detour." Guy turned at the next exit and I looked behind us to see a large black SUV follow us down the ramp. "Damn it," he cursed.

Again, he took the next right and then another left, the SUV following our every move.

"Who do you think it is?" I asked, kneading my fingers together nervously. *Great*. That was the last thing we needed, to be caught when we were so close.

"FUSE." His eyes darted back to the mirror. "I'd recognize those Black SUVs anywhere."

"FUSE?" I gulped past the lump in my throat. Just the sound of the word caused fear to crawl through me and in my mind, I was suddenly back at Wilson's house, the FUSE soldier pointing a gun to my head. I shuddered.

"How did they find us?"

His expression drew in, tight and alert. "They have eyes everywhere, and being in a stolen vehicle probably doesn't help."

I glanced behind us again and saw the vehicle right on our tail, but could not make out the person or people inside. My body swayed with the movement of our truck and my pulse raced. "I don't want you to get in trouble," I said, thinking that ever since I'd turned into this creature, it seemed everyone I got close to was in danger. Everything around me was like a minefield, ready to explode at any moment. I couldn't bear it if Guy got caught because of me.

"I won't get in trouble," Guy said as if reading my mind. He shifted his eyes to the mirror. "No one has seen me yet. I just need to lose this guy, get you to Tombstone safely, and get myself back to headquarters fast as possible."

Before I had time to respond, Guy made a hairpin turn in the road, the tires grinding and spinning onto a dirt drive. My body jolted to the side, hitting the door.

"Hold on tight, Faith." Guy slid a gaze my way, smirking childishly. "This is going to be a bumpy ride."

The truck lurched forward and I gripped my thighs in angst as sparsely populated ranches and farms flew by, the black SUV still hot on our trail.

"It's a good thing I picked a four wheel drive." Guy chuckled as we swerved and jumbled over the bumpy terrain. I looked over at him and could tell he was enjoying himself now, his boyish smile making me giggle despite

our dire circumstances.

I looked behind us again to see the vehicle closing in and my heart hammered in my chest in response. “We’re not losing them.”

“He’s an amateur.” Guy tightened his hands on the wheel. “He hasn’t seen nothin’ yet.”

He slammed the pedal to the floorboard and dust poured out from the back of our truck, fogging the way for our pursuer. We made a quick right and sped around a bend until coming to an overpass. Instead of ascending the bridge, Guy bucked us off the road and down a steep hill, the truck almost vertical.

My voice cracked in my throat and I held tight to the side bar. I pushed my back against the seat to stay upright. “Are you sure about this?”

“Don’t you worry, Faith,” Guy said. “I promised Wilson I’d protect you and I never break a promise.”

I held my breath as we descended rapidly, our bodies shaking with the bumpy decline. The night was so dark; I could barely see the bottom of what seemed a ravine. But I focused my sight and saw the end. We were close.

I gasped as we hit ground level, the truck spinning out and ducking us beneath the underpass. Guy flicked off the headlights and ceased the engine, the only sound was our heavy breathing. I gazed out with my vampire vision, the fine dirt glistening like stardust as it settled in the moonlight. Guy surprised me by grabbing my hand in his, electric shocks jolting up my arm, making me shiver with his warmth.

“It’s okay.” He looked at me from within the darkness. “We’re safe now.”

The excitement of the chase heightened my senses, and with Guy’s closeness, the attraction grew thick and heavy between us. I could feel our two hearts beating in time with each other, his warm blood and my cold, coursing vibrantly through our veins. My head turned to his, and his to mine, our lips mere inches apart. I leaned in closer, wanting to press my mouth to his, but hesitated. At his warm breath on my lips, a heavy ache settled into my gut and I couldn’t do it, knowing it would only cause trouble.

Headlights approached the top of the ravine and Guy swiftly sat up straight at their increasing glow, forgetting our closeness. We sat still and silent until the black SUV that had been following us flew over us on the bridge and disappeared from sight. Guy released a short breath and smiled, combing his fingers through his hair in relief.

“That was a close one.”

I smiled, but it was a solemn one. I had to admit I was saddened we were in the clear, because that meant I would be at Tombstone within the hour.

“Maybe we should wait until tomorrow night,” I offered with a shrug. “Until we’re absolutely sure we aren’t being followed anymore. We could find another seedy motel and watch a movie? We could have a memorial for Wilson.” I grinned hopefully.

Guy slid me an apologetic smile. “No. We’re fine now. Plus, I need to get back to headquarters by morning or they’ll start to get suspicious.”

I was about to reply when a burst of lights and spraying rock erupted from the top of the ravine. Guy and I froze in fear, our chins lifting upward to see the black SUV take air over the ridge and slam down hard onto the rocky hill, descending toward us with unrelenting speed. Closer… closer.

“Shit.” Guy turned the engine, the truck roaring to life. He slammed his foot to the petal, causing the tires to spin out a cloud of dust. The vehicle bucked, but then settled back into place, panic gripping my insides.

“What’s wrong?” I clasped the sides of my seat, fear coursing through me. Guy pumped the petal again and again, the tires screaming at their stunted use.

“We’re stuck.” His face drew in hard with strain as he tried yet again to move the truck. But each attempt seemed to dig us deeper into the mire. My heart thundered against my ribcage and I dared a look upward. The SUV’s bright beams bounced from its bumpy decline, illuminating the dust and debris it kicked up. It was nearly half way down.

“Damn it!” Guy pounded the steering wheel in frustration and, yet again, slammed his foot to the petal. Rubber grinded dirt, squelching and crunching. But the truck shuddered, unmoving.

“Get out,” he commanded, shifting his wide eyes to me. “Run.”

My frightened lungs pumped air quickly in and out of my chest. I shook my head in denial.

“No,” I breathed, barely above a whisper. The glow from the approaching SUV danced across Guy’s face, casting his tense jawbone into light and shadow.

“Go. I can handle this. But you can’t be caught.”

I fisted my hands to stop them from trembling.

“I’m not leaving you.” Fear blazed through my chest. “I won’t.”

“Don’t be foolish, Faith!” Guy tried the tires once again to no avail. He shot me a steely glance. “Use your speed. Tombstone’s only a few miles away. You can make it there quickly.”

Burning rubber prickled my nose and dust burned my eyes. Fright tore through me at the thought of leaving Guy this way. This wasn’t how it was supposed to happen. I wasn’t ready yet.

“I… I don’t care. I can’t leave you.”

For a split second, Guy’s expression melted into softness. He was about to say something when the SUV blanched into sight and, after fishtailing, slammed into us, the concussion knocking our bodies sideways. Dust clouded the air making it hard to see. I shook my head from the stun of the impact and looked to Guy. He blinked dizzily, but seemed physically unharmed. Our scared eyes met.

“Go!” he hollered. “You can still get away.”

I don’t know if it was the panic rising in my throat like bile, or the fear I

saw in Guy's face, but I grabbed my door handle and jiggled it. It wouldn't budge. The SUV had crushed my side of the vehicle, trapping me inside.

"I can't! It won't open."

I heard a door open and footsteps crunching our way. Guy sucked in a deep breath, and leaned over me to grasp at the handle.

"Damn it Faith! I— Todd?"

I took in Guy's shocked expression, and followed his eyes to the windshield. A man in a FUSE uniform stood there alone, illuminated by the headlights, panting with heavy breath. Guy and the soldier stared at each other for one long moment, the dust settling around us to reveal our two dented vehicles.

The stranger saluted, three fingers frozen to his shoulder and I watched in utter shock as Guy smiled, his body sagging with reprieve. He opened the door of the truck and called out to the soldier.

"God damn it, Kemp! Are you trying to kill me?"

The man stayed in position, but gave a half-hearted smile. "Sorry, Sir. Lost control, Sir."

"At ease soldier." Guy made his way to the front of the vehicle. Kemp dropped his hand and after a moment, the two men hugged, thumping each other on the back.

My mouth hung open in awe. It was clear by the way Guy was acting that we weren't in imminent danger anymore. But still, the man was a FUSE solider and trepidation clung to my insides like glue. As if sensing my unease, Guy locked eyes with me through the windshield and smiled. "It's okay," he mouthed, holding up a hand, signaling me stay in the truck. He turned back to Kemp.

"What were you doing chasing me down like that?" Despite the purr of the truck's engine, I strained my ears, listening in on their conversation. Kemp dug a boot into the dirt, his eyes flickering from me to Guy.

"I've been trying to find you Sir and couldn't reach you by your cell."

Guy eyed his friend warily, the headlights illuminating the profiles of the two men. "What could be so important that you'd hunt me down like this? I told you I was taking a few personal days. What is this about, Kemp?"

Kemp licked his dry lips nervously, shifting his weight from one leg to another. "We have an Unfortunate at headquarters, Sir. The only survivor of the Bisbee battle."

I creased my brows, confused. I thought *I* was the only survivor from that night. Images flashed in my head of the battle, the night I awoke amongst explosions and fire, thinking I was in some sort of hell. Dread trickled through me at the mention of it. Kemp reached behind him and produced a long white envelope. He held it tight, continuing his explanation.

"The Unfortunate I speak of asked me to deliver a message for him. He said it was important."

Guy grimaced uncomfortably, digging his hands into his pockets. "You

know that's against the rules, Kemp. Detainees are allowed no contact with the outside world."

"I know." The soldier's voice was shaky and uncertain. "I would've ignored him except for something he kept saying. A name that might be of some interest to you."

Guy cocked his head to the side. "What name?"

Kemp took a deep breath, flipping the envelope over in his hands. "Ruby Carter, the girl you asked me to check up on last we talked."

My stomach lurched at the mention of my name— anxiety and fear combined. Guy had checked up on me? And who on earth would know of me in the world of Unfortunates? Unless…

My heart hammered in my chest with realization. The night I awoke after having died in the car accident, I was turned into a vampire. But I was alone, my maker nowhere to be found. Could this be the Unfortunate they talked about? My maker? I inhaled slowly, trying to calm the raging turmoil inside my brain, a wash of emotions I couldn't quite decipher.

Kemp handed over the envelope, Guy studying it before offering me a quick glance. He shifted his attention back to the soldier.

"Does anyone know you've done this?"

"No, Sir."

"Does anyone know you're here, that you've come looking for me?"

"No, Sir."

Guy sucked in a mouthful of air and released it slowly. He looked sternly into the other man's face. "All right, then. Let's keep it that way. And we'll worry about this Unfortunate business once I get back to headquarters."

Kemp shuffled his feet in the dirt. "If I may be so bold in asking Sir, when might that be?"

Guy raked a hand through his disheveled hair and sighed. "Soon, Kemp." He glanced to me and then back. "I have some business I need to attend first, but I should be there by morning."

Guy saying that I was merely business would've hurt me, had I not been so preoccupied with that darned envelope. I couldn't keep my eyes off of it. I needed to know what was in there. I needed to know if it was a clue to who my maker was.

Kemp went to his SUV and opened up the trunk. He came back with a couple of wooden boards. He and Guy shoved the boards beneath the two front tires of our truck. They both met back in front of the windshield and looked at each other.

After a moment of silence, Guy stepped forward and patted Kemp on the arm. "Keep up the good work, solider. And this," he tapped the envelope, "stays between us. All right?"

Kemp nodded, his gaze hesitantly sliding my way. After a moment, he jumped into the black SUV and drove away, leaving a trail of dust. Guy climbed back into the truck and shut the door. He gazed at me, his eyes soft

and liquid, and handed me the envelope. I glanced down at it in my hands, my heart squeezing in my chest. The name on the front was drawn in neat, uppercase letters.

RUBY CARTER.

I glanced back at Guy, the blue glow of the dash washing over his face. My voice shook when I spoke. "You're not going to read it?"

Guy shifted into drive and revved the engine. After a moment, the truck bucked forward and drove smoothly over the wooden boards, releasing us from our stuck position. We both knew what this might mean; that this envelope might just be the answer I'd been searching for all along. He glanced over at me and sighed.

"It's not mine to read. That's your decision."

Guy made his way up the rocky wash and back onto the highway. After a while, I saw battered old signs signaling our nearness to Tombstone. My limbs went numb, my body tingling with nerves.

"Guy?" I clenched the envelope between my palms.

"Yeah?"

I didn't want to admit my fear, but I found the words slipping from my mouth anyway.

"I'm scared."

I wasn't exactly sure what scared me more: joining the other Unfortunates of Tombstone, or opening the envelope. But either way, fear and anxiety tore through my body.

"You'll be fine," Guy replied with a sincere gaze. "Like Wilson said, you're strong and determined. You'll fit in fine. And whatever is in that envelope is for you only. It's not my business anymore."

My heart sank at his words. He might as well have said *I* wasn't his business anymore. But I understood. Guy had another life to lead and we wouldn't be able to stay together this way, as enemies. But the truth still didn't subdue my sorrow. And now with my impending stay in Tombstone just around the corner, fear dug deeper into my soul.

I wasn't just some normal vampire joining its kin. I was a half-breed weirdo with super-hero powers and the heart of a human. But I had no other choice at that point but to try and acclimate. We came upon a barricade in the road marking our approach to the old ghost town. A sign hung there saying 'Condemned: Turn back.' But Guy veered off the road and went around it. He kept on driving.

"Think of it as a fresh start," he said, focusing on the road. "A new beginning to a brand new life. Not many people get a chance like this."

I didn't reply because I didn't want him to hear the fear and sorrow in my voice. I wanted to be strong, no *needed* to be strong for what was to come. I was a vampire now and I was almost home. And maybe, just maybe, I would finally find out who my maker was.

THIRTY-SEVEN: RUBY

Nervous tingles ran up my spine as I held the envelope between my palms. The envelope from, who could only be assumed as, my maker. I gazed down at my name plainly written on the front, my heart skipping a beat.

RUBY CARTER

Guy cleared his voice, bringing my attention back to his grey eyes, the dim light from the dash giving them a blue glow. "Aren't you going to open it?" he asked.

I glanced back down at the letter. I'd assumed he wanted me to wait until getting to Tombstone to open it, but apparently now was the time. Apprehension spread through my gut like frothy water running into a bath as my fingers curled around the paper. "Do we have enough time?"

The truck careened down the lone highway, the roadside signs signaling our closeness to Tombstone. Guy stared out the window for one long moment and then slid me a smile. He lifted his foot from the gas pedal, the truck decelerating to a crawl.

"I'll make time."

The wide open desert streamed by us so slowly it was as if time stood still. I returned Guy's smile and sighed nervously, feeling the paper between my fingers.

If this letter was from my maker like I assumed, that left me with the question of why? Why now? And what could they possibly have to say? But regardless of my trepidations, I couldn't wait any longer. I took a breath, trying to calm my frenzied heart, and peeled open the back. I slid out the paper from inside, unfolding it with trembling fingers.

Highway lights flashed over the page and the words blinked in and out of sight, but I saw them just the same.

Dear Ruby,

My name is Frank Cavalon. I've dreamed of writing you this letter a hundred times over in my mind. But now that I am able, I find the words difficult to produce. Therefore, I will just come right out and say it. Ruby, I am your biological father.

My breath caught in my chest and I released an audible gasp. Guy slid me a curious sidelong glance but said nothing. I offered him an uncomfortable smile and when he looked away, I dropped my unbelieving eyes back to the

page, my heart pounding inside of me.

I need you to know that I never wanted to leave you and your mother, but under the circumstances I had to for your safety. It pains me more than I could ever express that I was never able to hold you in my arms once you were born. But the past is the past and now I find myself in a situation where this may very well be the only communication I will ever have with you. There are so many things I've wanted to tell you, and I speak to you in my mind every day of my life. But there is only so much room on this paper, and only so much time in which I have to write. So here goes.

Whether you could see me or not, I was always with you, Ruby, since the day you were born. I watched from the shadows when you took your first step. I saw your eyes light up when you rode your bicycle for the first time. I was there the night you broke your leg in the front lawn and cried crocodile tears. I wanted more than anything to take you in my arms and comfort you the way a real father should. But all I could do was watch with sadness from the darkness, my heart breaking.

I was there when you had your first school dance. My heart swelled seeing you dressed up like a princess, your hair curled and your make-up on. I was there for your high school graduation, the proudest father in the world.

The truck hit a pothole and my body bounced in response. Anticipation coursed through me at what I suspected to find in the letter. My lips quivered and my heart threatened to pound out of my chest. But I continued reading, unable to peel my eyes from the page.

I was there for it all, Ruby. You were never alone like I know you felt all those years. Your mother was always a good mother, and though I hate to admit it, the man who took my place, loved you despite his long hours away. I could never truly thank them for taking such good care of my daughter, but I am so very grateful they did. But all the times I was there for you, the last time painfully grates at my soul.

I was there the night you rushed into the rain, driving away with a heavy heart. I know what happened. And I know your mother finally told you about me and it kills me that it had such an effect on you. But she never knew my reason for leaving, for I was unable to tell her. And I can't imagine how mad you must've been finding out that I'd abandoned you both. That was never my intention.

But I followed you that night, worried for your safety. And when your car crashed, it was me who held you in my arms as you bled. I was never able to hold you in my arms in life, but I held you in death, savoring our closeness.

It was my eyes that you finally looked upon for the first time, our first reunion. But it wasn't the reunion I'd always dreamed about. You were dying and I didn't know what to do. I couldn't bear to lose you that way, not when I knew I could do something about it. So I pulled you from the car before it burst into flames and took you to the one place I knew you'd be safe. A place where people like me hide away.

A cool waft of air blasted my face as Guy cracked the window, and I found myself gripping the paper so hard, my knuckles ached. My eyes wavered with sorrow and joy combined, threatening to spill hot tears. Instead of letting them fall, I trudged on, wanting to know more. *Needing* to know more.

But they took me away before I could see you through your transformation. They —the men who wish our kind dead—ambushed our hideout and killed everyone except me, taking me prisoner. Rage tore through me when I thought they'd killed you, but then I sensed you. Because I was the one who made you, I knew you still lived, and still live to this day. And wherever you are, I hope that you will forgive me for what I've done to you. Though my existence has been a dark one, I thought if I could save you, I might yet see the light again. As I look back I know it was a selfish move, but at the time it was the only option I could see. I couldn't let death take my little girl away.

Daughter, I've given you a dark gift, turned you into something inhuman without your consent. And for that I am gravely sorry. I understand if you hate me for all eternity, but just know that the love I hold for you in my heart is unconditional. Know that I've only ever wanted the best for you and couldn't bear the thought of losing you at such a young age. Please forgive me, Ruby. For everything. I pray you forgive me for leaving you in the most important years of your life, when a father should be there. Please forgive me for making the decision to turn you. And please forgive me for leaving you, yet again, to fend for yourself.

I am now in custody, and this is why I write in such haste, for I know my time is coming to an end. I will not answer their questions and will not submit to their demands. And more than likely, by the time you receive this letter, if you ever do, I will probably be dead. I'm sorry, my daughter. I am so very sorry. My heart aches for what I've done.

I love you to the ends of the earth. Please forgive me.

Frank Cavalon (Dad)

Warmth, and something like heartache, spread through my chest. A tear fell from my cheek spreading a moist blossom on the page next to my real father's name. And like a grenade, flashes of memories and bright colors exploded through my brain and the truck in which I sat faded, each color bleeding into a vision, a sequence of events from my life.

Remembrance struck me so hard I thought I might be a firework suspended in the sky, exploding to pieces. It started from the time I was a newborn babe wrapped in swaddling, giggling at the mysterious brown eyes watching from the shadows. Next, I saw my home, my family. Saw myself as if watching a slideshow. The pictures flashed by quickly, eliciting every emotion possible from me, my chest constricting beneath their heavy weight.

Moments flipped by, time lapsed, and I grew older. My face changed, round cheeks turning defined. My freckles faded, legs elongated. The body of

a young woman replaced that of a child and my heart grew stronger as I did. My parent's faces shadowed with age, their hair greying at the sides. But all the while, I saw those timeless brown eyes just like mine watching me as I grew, guarding me as I slept. My heart wrenched.

I remembered. I remembered everything and nothing and the smell of life and death. I remembered the love I had for my father, regardless of his blood connection to me. I remembered my dreams and aspirations as if I'd stuffed them in a bottle, sending them out to sea. But amongst the slices of life whirring by in my brain, one specific moment froze, fading into focus.

I lay pinned within the wrecked car. Rain. Cold rain. Brown eyes that now took on a purple glow carried me from the crash, strong arms holding me as I bled, as I died. My father, my real father, was there. Frank. He was a vampire, but kind and compassionate. He couldn't watch me die. He couldn't see his daughter be taken by the arms of death while he held the gift of immortality, one which he could give to me.

Sharp pain stung my neck as fangs pierced my skin. I had little blood left in my body from the crash anyway, so it only took moments for me to be fully drained. As the last drop of blood left my body, blackness descended. I was vaguely aware of being carried away, as though flying, rain spraying over me and Frank. I vaguely remembered voices and greetings of concern. Hands on me. And then gunshots. Fire blazing. Pain. The voices turned to screams. The screams disappeared, leaving me alone. An explosion ripped through me, tearing my clothes from my body, scalding my skin.

But I felt the blood of life course through my veins, the blood Frank, my father, had given me. It mended my wounds, healing my body as I writhed. And just when I was certain I was dying all over again, I saw another face. The face of an angel in combat gear. He held a gun to my head, his expression twisting. But then he dropped his weapon and knelt down.

"Shit, I'm gonna regret this."

My brain jolted, trying to process the memories. But as soon as they'd come, the blips of recollection shattered to pieces, flying away like ash on a breeze. My body battled between past and present, dream and reality.

"Ruby? Ruby are you all right?" The realness of Guy's voice broke through the haze, slicing me like a beam of hot light.

My heart pounded and my eyes blinked rapidly. The truck came back into focus, as well as Guy's concerned face. He looked from me to the road and back again.

"Ruby, what is it? What happened?"

I panted, barely breathing, holding the letter to my chest like a life raft. The words fell dry from my mouth.

"My… my father."

THIRTY-EIGHT: RUBY

"I remember…"

Something like joy and sorrow fought inside of me and I couldn't believe it— my biological father had been guarding me all these years. And he, of all people, was my maker. But he was captured now by FUSE and I would probably never have the chance to meet him. Grief constricted my heart.

I shook my head, trying to let the realization sink in. Guy turned his face from the road to look at me.

"Your father?" he asked, his hands tight at the wheel. "What… What do you mean, 'your father'?"

My eyes dropped to the letter in my lap, wet with tears. Relief over finally finding answers flushed through me.

"It was my father." I struggled for one breath and then another. "Well, my biological father— the one who I thought abandoned us years ago. He's the one. He's my maker." I caressed the paper gingerly, as if doing so I might get a better understanding of my real father and the kind of man he'd been. "His name is Frank."

"Frank? Your father?' Guy eyed me dubiously. "How can you be so sure? How do you know he's telling the truth?"

"I just know."

Guy nodded at my certainty, his eyes scanning the highway. It was well past midnight, closing in on dawn. Yet, the sky was as black as a raven's wing.

"I'm glad you finally know." Guy's voice was raw and husky.

"Me too." I felt my lips curling into a smile, but faltered. "But, Guy?"

Guy shifted in his seat. "Yeah."

"I can't go to Tombstone now, not when I know my father is being held prisoner. You have to take me to him. I have to help save him."

Guy shook his head, a stern expression washing over his face. "No way, Faith. I can't do it. You would be killed, we both would be killed. We cannot chance it."

"But—"

"Absolutely not," Guy interrupted me. "We've come all this way to see you safely to Tombstone and I'm not about to screw that up now. Plus I made a promise."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes, knowing all about Guy and his promises. I sighed heavily, letting go of my frustration. This was a fight I'd never win. I turned to Guy, still having questions.

"Your soldier Kemp said he's in custody. What will happen to him? Are they going to kill him?"

Silence fell between us for one long moment, before Guy released a heavy sigh. He cast me a serious glance.

"Normally, yes, he would be killed if he doesn't answer our questions and agree to work with us as an associate. But…" Guy absentmindedly swiveled the watch on his arm before placing both hands on the wheel again. He stared straight ahead. "But I will do whatever I can to make sure he remains unharmed."

"You'd do that for me?" I asked in disbelief. Guy had changed so much since we'd first met, I hardly saw the cold Captain in him anymore. Hell, I'd changed too, hardly recognizing myself anymore. I gazed longingly at his chiseled profile, thinking that in our time together, we'd both grown into better people— well, one person and one vampire. But regardless, I finally felt like we'd found our true selves and could both make something better of the world in which we lived. Guy slid me a boyish smile, the kind that melted my heart.

"Of course I'll do it, for you."

Relief flooded me like a warm river and something else… was it love? Love for the illustrious Captain Guy Stone? I dropped my gaze, fiddling my fingers together nervously. My face flushed hot.

"This is it," Guy announced, shooting a bullet of fear through my heart. I sat up straight, my eyes searching the outside. I hadn't even noticed how close we were to Tombstone, being too wrapped up in the letter from Frank and my feelings for Guy. He pulled off the side of Freemont Street and parked beneath a large mesquite tree.

From there, in the distance, I could see the entrance to Tombstone. It looked like the pictures I'd seen from the cave-ins years ago, except now there was a tall wall closing off the city and two large wooden gates at the front. Crumbling buildings with boarded-up windows peeked over the top of the enclosure and a large sign painted in red letters warned us to "Stay out: Condemned."

I gazed upon the scene, my lips trembling as I tucked the envelope into the band of my pants along with the picture I'd taken from my home. I'd always assumed once I arrived at Tombstone I'd be nervous, but nothing could prepare me for the fear that seized my heart in that moment.

This was it, the moment we'd been waiting for, and now that we were finally here, I didn't like it at all. But I sucked in a deep breath and readied myself as much as I possibly could. Guy exited the truck and came around to my side, opening my door just like a proper gentleman to help me out. I moved toward the corner of the street but Guy stopped behind me.

"I can't go any further. There will be surveillance."

A lump formed in my throat and my heart plummeted to the soles of my feet. I turned back to him and forced a half-hearted smile. Guy returned the sad smile and looked down at his watch. "It's time to go."

I bit my bottom lip softly but stayed stuck in place.

"It's all right," he coaxed. "I'll stay until they let you in."

I sucked in a huge mouthful of air, my eyes threatening to spill unwanted tears. I shuffled toward Guy and stood in front of him. He looked down at me with his storm-cloud gaze, a storm I wanted to be swept away in but knew it was never possible.

Without warning, he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me close, my head resting against his chest. He rocked me slowly back and forth, my body going limp in his warm embrace. I breathed him in, that irresistible smell of man, musk and leather and steel. My shoulders shook and my lips quavered, but I forced myself to stay strong and do what must be done. After a while, I pulled away, knowing if I stayed in his arms any longer I'd never let him go.

"Thank you." I smiled, but it was a sad one. "For all you've done."

"It was nothing." Guy grinned and shoved his hands in his pockets. He no longer looked like the hard-as-nails Captain Stone, but a boy in love with a girl. A girl he was letting go.

I reluctantly turned and took a few steps, my heart beating a mile a minute. My body told me to be strong and go on with my journey, but my heart… my heart told me to stay, to never leave the side of my true love, a man I could never be with.

I took another step, the ground crunching beneath my white tennis shoe. I wondered if I'd ever be capable of truly loving someone, finding it hard to believe with what I'd become— being a cold-blooded vampire and all. I clutched the rosary around my neck and answered my own adverse question. Yes, I was capable of love. Though I hadn't admitted it yet, I loved Guy Stone with all of my heart, more than words could describe.

Guy was it, my heart and my soulmate. Guy was my person.

A choir of cricket chirps fetid the air as if it were just any other normal night. But it wasn't normal, strangely being the furthest thing from normal you could get. Instantly, the tears I'd been holding back spilled free and I spun back around. As if in a dream, I ran and flung my arms around him, sobbing into his chest. I let out everything, all of my emotions and feelings, all the hurt and pain, all the love and adoration I had for him. I didn't care anymore and I couldn't hold it in any longer. I wanted him to know the truth and my words came out between ragged breaths.

"Please, don't leave me. I can't be without you. I… love you."

Guy pulled back, holding me at arm's length. His eyes connected with mine, blazing. "Ruby…"

My breath hitched.

It was the first time he'd used my real name, instead of calling me Faith. He'd actually said it. He'd called me Ruby. I looked up into his face, etched with deep emotion. He ran his fingers through my hair affectionately.

"No." His voice broke, a conflicted sound. "We can't be together. You know it as well as I do."

"Why not?" I ran my palm down the side of his jaw, tears spilling from my eyes. "Who is to say who we can or cannot love? Tell me, why?"

I could see Guy struggling to hold back his feelings. "It's just the way it is."

I pulled back and thudded a clenched fist against his chest. "No! It's not the way it is. We can make our own way, Guy Stone. We have something and I know you feel it too. How can what we have be so wrong?"

His strong hands tried to still me, to calm me. But his voice cracked in response. "You are a vampire. I am a human."

I gazed into his eyes, looking deep into his soul. "I don't care. I want you. I want nothing else. No one else." I gestured to the gates of the old town. "None of this matters. None of it. You matter. You're the only thing I want. Please Guy. Please…"

Guy ran his fingers through his own hair in frustration. I could hear his heart beating in his chest and I knew it beat for me. Then suddenly, and without warning, Guy's emotions smashed through me like a blast of hot air. I gasped at the concussion, realizing what it was.

It was the sixth sense Wilson had tried to teach me, but this time it came without any effort. I sensed Guy's feelings and emotions; they poured from him and into me like water from a broken dam making me shiver and shake.

His torment. His conflict. His pain.

He held a pain deeper than I could've ever imagined, knowing he needed to let me go. He knew it was the right thing to do, the *only* thing to do. But behind the pain of the arduous decision he had to make, was love. A love for me so deep it ached, pulsing through both of us, connecting us beyond imagination. But Guy looked away as though his next words would be too painful to say while gazing into my eyes.

"I cannot do that to you. I cannot put you through that. You would be a target and we would be on the run, if we even got that far. We would be torn apart, Ruby. You could be hurt, possibly killed." Guy stepped away from me, leaving my arms hanging in the air. "I… I can't."

I wanted to say something, anything to convince him otherwise. I wanted to tell him that I knew he was bonded to me now. I wanted to tell him that it didn't matter and we could make it work. But I knew in the back of my mind, it would be in vain. Nothing would come of fighting with him.

I dropped to my knees, my chest heaving with sobs as I brought my arms around my middle. My mouth hung open to say something, but there was nothing more to say and nothing I could do to change my fate. I was a vampire and he was a human and we weren't meant to be together. End of

story. I'd always known it; I just hadn't wanted to believe it until now.

"I'm sorry, Ruby." Guy inhaled as if it would be the last breath he ever took. "I made a promise to Wilson. We just… can't."

I bolted to my feet, anger surging through me like lines of fire. Was I angry with Guy or Wilson? The situation? My family? Death, even? I wasn't sure. But either way, I exploded all the same.

"I know!" I screamed in spite of myself. "I freaking know!"

The force of my words brought Guy's gaze to mine. He rushed forward, stopping only inches from my face, his eyes smoldering with heated fury.

"Damn it, Ruby Carter! I love you too…"

And like a fierce beast, he grabbed me and crushed his lips against mine, forcing his tongue into my mouth. I reciprocated, searching his mouth with my own. Our tears were wet against each other's cheeks, the heat of our love coursing through us like waves crashing in the ocean. I melted into him and him into me, nothing else existing in the world but us. The crickets' chirping faded, the night went still, and the moonlight dimmed. The world blurred out of focus.

He moved his mouth against mine, hard and furious, hungry and demanding. I took what he gave me and returned it with eager abandon. Our hands searched each other's bodies, sensual heat following in the wake of our touch.

Our connection lasted for hours and minutes and centuries all in one, our bodies mingling, our souls touching, our hearts breaking together. This was the beginning of the end, the last page of a book, the final sunset before an eternal night.

When our lips parted, my breath caught in my chest. I would die of heartache if I stayed any longer. My heart was already crushing inside of my chest.

I tried to pull away, but this time it was Guy who wouldn't let go. Our eyes met, but I wrenched myself out of his arms knowing that nothing would ever change. We could never be together. My body left his, my fingertips the last to touch his chest before I stumbled away.

"Ruby…" he whispered, reaching out for me.

I shook my head. No, we mustn't draw this out. I looked deep into his eyes and, before walking away, spoke the truest words of my heart.

"Even though I must *live* amongst them, I will never *be* one of them."

Guy opened his mouth but no words came out, his fists clenched at his sides, his face tense with loss.

I moved backward toward the large gates, our gazes staying connected all the while. I took a mental photograph of the man I loved, hoping to keep him in my mind forever. The way he stood, the way he smiled, the way he held me close. The way his eyes would penetrate my soul, the way he would run his hand through his hair in thought, and the way his jaw clenched when he was mad.

Brokenhearted, I continued walking backward, his form growing smaller in the distance. Our gazes stayed locked until a loud snapping flash spun me around and I found myself standing in a harsh white spotlight, squinting against the blinding lumens.

"New recruit!" A man called out from somewhere up high on a watchtower and my heart pounded anxiously. The gates slowly creaked open and a small woman approached me. She looked young, about the same age as me. Her long brown hair tumbled over a brown cloak and her pale skin shone beneath her hood. Her nose was small and button-like and it scrunched when she smiled. She stood before me.

"I need to see your fangs." Her voice was soft and unthreatening but my pulse still raced and my legs shook. The skin of my face was tight from recently fallen tears and my lips quivered with uncertainty. I drew my brows together in concentration and bared my fangs to her, as Wilson had taught me.

A smile peeled across her pale lips. "Sorry. It's just protocol. Come on in."

She took my arm and guided me toward the dark entrance of the large wooden gate. I looked back over my shoulder to see that Guy had gone, and if at all possible, my heart sank a little deeper. My throat burned, another sob threatening to release. But I wouldn't cry anymore.

"What's your name?" she asked, bringing my attention back.

"Ruby." I inhaled through my nose and exhaled out through my mouth. "Ruby Carter."

She smiled. "That's a nice name. Welcome to Tombstone, Ruby."

I forced a smile in response. Ruby was indeed my name, but in my heart, I would always be Faith.

THIRTY-NINE: GUY

Seeing her walk away was like watching my own heart being torn from my chest. It was as if my skeleton had been ripped from my body and each bone shoved roughly back in. I thought I could never feel that way again. I thought I could never love again.

After I'd lost Lilly, I vowed never to open myself up for fear of the tremendous pain that would likely ensue. But this was different. This was more than a college infatuation, more than a lustful love. This was global. It was like the universe had dropped Ruby in front of me that night at the warehouse, as though I were meant to save her, to protect her. And something about this beautiful vampire made the darkness in me fade. She had a light about her, a blinding radiance of joy and innocence. A light that cast my doubts aside. I'd felt alive again for the first time in years.

Even before I bonded myself to Ruby, before I drank her blood, there was a connection between us, something I'd never thought possible. But if I asked her to stay with me, it would only attract danger and the last thing I wanted to do was put Ruby in harm's way. Leaving her was the hardest decision I'd ever had to make in my entire life, but it was one that I had to face.

I wanted to step forward to call out to her, to tell her I'd made a mistake, but that would only prolong the pain of losing her. She was like a beautiful bird, one that could not be caged, and I needed to set her free. The gates opened for her and my jaw clenched. I jumped into the truck and drove away for fear of being seen.

In some other time, another realm, a distant past or parallel life, we were meant to be together. My love for Ruby Carter would never be forgotten, no matter any length of time nor distance of space. But as all great love stories go, there is always an end. And this was our end. Our time was up.

I ran my hand down the back of her empty seat, as if in doing so I could touch her one last time. But she was gone and that was that. I dropped my hand in reluctant acceptance, the sensation of cool metal brushing against my skin. I grabbed the surprise item, holding it up in the dim moonlight and, upon recognition, I laughed. I laughed so hard my stomach ached.

There in my hand lay a spoon perfectly bent in half, the curve so impeccable, I'd have sworn it'd been made that way. Its silver shone like a

gem and warmth spread through my chest.

She'd done it. She'd finally done it! My first instinct was to hug her and congratulate her but the warmth that had spread through my body at seeing the spoon went cold. She wasn't there and I'd never be able to tell her what a good job she'd done. I would never be able to say the words I'd always wanted to say. I blew out a frustrated breath and tucked the silver token into my pack. It might be silly, but I would keep it always.

The night was warm and I rolled down both windows to let the breeze cool my face. I flew down the highway toward Bisbee, toward headquarters, knowing it was time to either regain the position of my old life, or consider a change.

I drove in silence, my mind muddled with questions. I wondered how I could ever continue my old life, knowing I could no longer protect Ruby. I wondered if she'd grown enough that she could protect herself. I hoped that was the case. I rolled my shoulders to relieve the tension in them, reassuring myself that she would be fine.

But what about me? What would I do when I got back to headquarters? Her biological father would surely be there and I'd promised to help him. But how I would go about doing that, I hadn't the slightest idea.

I also wondered how I could ever rejoin the cause I'd pledged my life to, knowing what I knew now. I couldn't help but wonder if I'd made a wrong choice somewhere along the way, if I'd blindly chosen a side I knew nothing about. But before I even had a chance to further ponder my doubts a loud bang hit the roof of the truck.

Instinctively, I slammed the brakes, sending the vehicle swerving. I scanned the road to see if I'd hit anything but the highway was empty. I was alone in the darkness, except for the dim headlights of my truck.

"Hello there, Captain." A scratchy voice made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end and my eyes flew to the sound. A pair of black eyes peered at me from the passenger window and instantly I wasn't alone anymore. Fear blackened my heart as the form of a vampire materialized next to me and I veered off the road.

As the pair of fangs sank into my neck, I sensed Ruby's fear, cold and dreadful. She was in trouble and I knew it then, I'd made a mistake. I should've never left her. I hardly had time to regret my decision when my body gave way to the darkness, my mind fading, and along with it, thoughts of my vampire Faith.

FORTY: RUBY

Within the gates of Tombstone lay a city beyond my imagination, a supernatural world where vampires walked freely and werewolf children played in the streets. It was a beautiful old-world community, connected and harmonious. It was a family.

Family.

The word permeated my mind like a soothing blanket, and I couldn't help but think that's all I'd ever wanted, needed. I supposed that's all anyone ever wanted; acceptance, love, and a place to call home. And as I looked back on my long journey, I knew that's exactly what I'd received— love and acceptance from the most unlikely of souls.

I thought of my real father and how I found comfort in knowing he'd been there all along, finding he was the one who made me this way. I thought of Wilson and gained joy from his quirky smile and sound advice. And lastly I thought of Guy. My Captain. My love. There aren't enough words to explain what he'd done for me and the adoration I held for him. But regardless of the place he held in my heart, it was time to move on. Time to join my new family.

I followed my guide— the vampire girl who'd fetched me at the gates— through the crumbling, yet lively town. And I smiled. I smiled wider than I had in a long time. I was finally home.

The girl latched a hand to my arm and stopped me abruptly.

"I'm sorry." She frowned, the kerosene lamps along the dirt road highlighting her distraught face.

"Sorry?" I shook my head in confusion, narrowing my eyes on her. "For what?"

"You're going to have to come with me." At her words, a sudden darkness seeped through me like a lunar eclipse. She brushed her brown hair away from her ageless face. "Until you can be questioned by the legion, you're going to have to come with me. I'll show you to your cell."

Cell? My heart hammered against the inside of my ribcage.

"Wait—what—?"

Before I knew it, I was rushed away in a blur of colors, screaming out for the only person I knew could help me in my time of need. Guy Stone.

~THE END~

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Jade xoxo

SNEAK PEEK

BROKEN SOULS

~ book two~

RUBY

My imprisonment blazed angry thoughts through my mind, but I was too weak to do anything about it. I opened my mouth to speak, but my throat crackled with disuse. I licked my lips, swallowing what little saliva I had left and tried again.

"Ex— excuse me?"

The two werewolves guarding my cell shifted, but remained rigid and silent. Well, they were in their human forms but I could smell their canine scent.

"I'm thirsty, hungry. Can I please have some blood?" My voice rasped, dryer than the desert I grew up in. "Human blood?"

I stifled a gag, knowing I'd never drink it. The stuff made me choke. And after Wilson's discovery of me still being half-human, it was just wrong like a pig eating bacon. Gag. But I needed the female vampire to come back, the one who'd originally found me at the gates of Tombstone.

Since my being locked up, she'd brought me blood every day and was the only one I had contact with. And I had a feeling she was the only one I would get any answers from. I sure as heck wouldn't get anything from Humpty and Dumpty, that's for sure— well maybe some grunts and snarls, and an odd lingering scent of wet dog, but who would want that?

As if my prayers were answered, a door opened somewhere in the building, indicating that it was feeding time. Relief washed over me at the fact that I would yet again see the young vampire.

Her footsteps padded down the hall, echoing like raindrops. A candle lit her face as she came into view with a cup in hand and a bundle under her arm. Her unkempt hair hung in gnarled strands and she wore the same clothes as the first night she fetched me from the gates. So many nights ago. Her ripped brown skirt and faded shirt looked little more than rags and I thought she

resembled a peasant girl from one of the old black and white westerns my dad used to watch on TV. Disgust coursed through my veins at the sight of her.

Humpty unlocked my cell and slid open the bars, allowing the female vampire to enter cautiously as if I would jump out and bite her. After being locked up for so long, I just might.

Except for a deceptive greeting that welcomed me my first night, she'd yet to say one word to me since I was imprisoned, since arriving at Tombstone— The City of Unfortunate Souls. And for someone so stubborn in their resolve, she struck me as a frightened mouse, her brown hair hanging over her meek shoulders as she leaned down to place the cup next to my feet. She cast her eyes downward as if afraid I'd speak to her. Damn right I would.

"What's your name?" I asked, causing her to flinch. I was so done. Done being sucked into the numbness and heartache that overcame me in the passing days, done letting the darkness seep into my mind, done being the victim. I would not let Wilson's memory be in vain. Since I no longer had a family of my own, the old vampire became like a father to me, giving his life to protect me, as well as Guy had done in saving my life.

Guy Stone.

Just the name of my soldier caused an ache so bad I thought I might crumble from the inside out. Regardless of my unsated love and broken heart at having to separate from him— for our love was a forbidden one— he'd saved my life so I could live free here in Tombstone. Live safe without danger lurking around every corner.

And for what? For me to waste away behind bars? I shook my head in anger, gazing at the bars in front of me making slanted shadows on the ground. Both Wilson and Guy wouldn't want me to give up. I would never give up.

Ignoring my question, the female vampire pulled the blanket from my side and replaced it with a clean one. I almost laughed. So, for countless days they locked me away with no shred of communication or glimpse of the outside world, with only a meager serving of blood, but laundry held priority? I held back a scoff.

"Why am I in here?" I tried again.

Her lashes fluttered as if resisting the urge to look up. But she did and her timeless eyes landed on mine for one long moment. The girl looked to be about the same age as me, seventeen, maybe eighteen. But who knew how old she really was for vampires hid the effects of age well with their immortality. She avoided my gaze yet again and stuffed the old blanket under her arm, indignant on not responding to me.

"At least tell me how long I'll be here. I'm getting weak." That was not a lie. I hadn't drank the offered blood since being placed in that cell, however long ago that'd been. And I was beginning to feel the effects.

"Please…" I added, barely above a whisper. My resolve was waning.

Her body tensed at my plea, but my heart lifted when she glanced over

her shoulder at the guards. They were facing away, either unaware or uncaring of our exchange.

"I'm sorry," she breathed, dropping her gaze to the ground. "It's protocol. You'll be released after Horus questions you."

Fear slid through me like snakes. Questions me? That would be fine if I were just some normal vampire coming here to seek refuge. But I wasn't. I had a past I could not reveal.

"When?" I asked. "When am I to be questioned?" To my disappointment, the female stood and exited the cell without another word. I huffed with annoyance when the door closed with a loud clang. Great.

The guards regained their positions, rifles propped up on their shoulders. God, was everyone around here like this— so cold and unwilling to talk? Not like I wanted them to greet me with balloons and fruit punch or anything, but I sure as heck didn't expect to be thrown into jail like a common criminal. And with no explanation at that, just rigid silence. I wondered if all new arrivals were treated with such class, or if I was the only one to get the creepy-abandoned-ghost-town jail experience.

Wilson's warning instantly struck me. The old vampire had warned me not to reveal my secret to anyone— the secret that I was a rare half-breed who grew in strength faster than any other vampire. The secret that I still retained my humanity and compassion. And the secret that I was still half human.

According to Wilson, somewhere in my family history a vampire mated with a human, and that gene was passed down through the generations landing on, you guessed it, lucky me. I wasn't quite sure the science of it, something about my immunity to becoming a full vampire. But regardless, it had been activated within me when my maker bit me— my maker, who I'd recently found out was my biological father, and apparently the carrier of said vampire gene, though I'd never met him before.

Is that why I was kept in here for so long? Did they know I was different? Did they sense it? The thought terrified me, making me want to shirk away and slip back into blissful numbness, ignorant of my scenario. Instead I sat up straight, vying to keep my wits about me. I would await my questioning by this Horus creature and, if all went as planned, I wouldn't become a dead vampire in the process. I took the cup of blood and poured it down a crack in the floor like I'd done the past few days. I laid down on the wooden bench and rested my head on my arm.

Time went by unaccounted for and I wasn't sure if I fell asleep or not but the sound of a door opening down the hall had me jumping. I sat bolt upright, hearing the wolf guard's nervous murmurs.

"Horus," one hissed.

"Shut up," the other one retorted.

I wondered who this Horus was and by the looks on Humpty and Dumpty's faces, he wasn't someone you'd have a merry little chat about the weather with. Dread tore through me as the visitor approached, the fine hairs

on the back of my neck standing on end. If the guards feared Horus, maybe I should be too.

~*~

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Broken Souls
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ABOUT JADE

Jade M Phillips writes in the Paranormal Romance and Fantasy genres and is the author of the highly anticipated Unfortunate Souls Series amongst other titles. Jade, aside from being an author, can play guitar, do a frighteningly accurate portrayal of a spider monkey, and has the magical ability to vanquish entire armies of supernatural creatures with a flick of her pen. When she is not writing about mystical beings and lovable characters, she's having nightly dance parties with her kids, blogging about whatever tickles her fancy, and testing new recipes on the stove (which coincidentally, usually ends up testing her smoke detectors as well.) Jade resides in Arizona with her husband, two children, and her crazy cat, William Wallace Braveheart Fuzzy McFarland the Third.

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